



BETHANY SWAFFORD

A Regency
Mystery

Clarendon Estate

THE SINCLAIR SOCIETY
- BOOK THREE -

Clarendon Estate

The Sinclair Society Series, Volume 3

Bethany Swafford

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CLARENDON ESTATE

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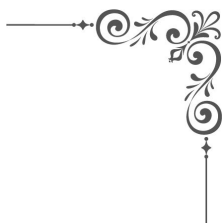
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Coming Soon

Also Available By Bethany Swafford

About the Author

For my parents who taught me to love reading



Chapter One

When the heat of summer became unbearable, many removed themselves to where activities out of doors were possible. With servants in tow, those who were fortunate enough to have a country estate, or have a friend with such a dwelling, made their way from the city.

For a guest on a country estate, there was entertainment and relaxation. For a servant, however, things were quite different. Even for a lady's maid.

The breeze carried the scent of flowers on it, and I breathed it in when I opened the window of the dressing room. In five years, the freshness of country air was something I'd dearly missed in London. No perfume could compare to the natural scent of the country.

As the fresh air swept through the room chasing out the staleness, I set about my daily duty of putting the room in order. It was not a task that would take long, and I was soon sorting out the delicate items of Lady Leith's wardrobe to launder.

Behind me, I heard the slight squeak of the door swinging open. "Miss Nelson, the flowers for my lady's dressing room."

Of all the tasks they expected me to do each day, arranging flowers was by far the easiest and most enjoyable. I would have preferred to select the flowers myself, but Lady Leith chose to do so herself. She would arrange flowers for the main areas of the house and send what was left for her dressing room.

I filled a vase with water and set the flowers in the liquid. Taking a step back, I studied the blossoms, working out the best

way to position them. The pale sweet peas seemed a little homely for the house of a baronet, but Lady Leith favoured them.

“Nelson, I intend on a walk this afternoon.”

Startled by the sudden statement, I glanced over my shoulder at my mistress, Lady Leith, who had just entered the dressing room. “Of course, my lady,” I said, obediently. I left the flowers to go to the wardrobe. I pulled out a pale blue walking dress.

“No, no,” she said, waving her hand in a dismissive way. “I doubt we will come across anyone who will remark upon my attire. The gown I am wearing will suffice. All I will need is my pelisse and bonnet.”

Without comment, for I had done much the same when I’d gone walking about my father’s estate, I collected the requested items. In a matter of minutes, Lady Leith was ready to set off. She had a strange expression of determination on her face.

“Now, you must make yourself ready, Nelson,” she said, barely glancing in my direction.

Astonished, I stared at her. “You wish for me to go with you?”

While lady Leith had often gone for walks since we had arrived at Clarendon, she had done so alone. Why did she wish for my company this time?

She faced me, an amused smile on her rosebud lips. “Is that so surprising? Do you really wish to remain inside on a day like this? Shall I meet you in the hall in ten minutes? Will that be enough time for you to ready yourself?”

It was more than enough time. All I had to do was collect my spencer jacket and a suitable bonnet. To be honest, no matter why she wished for my company, the idea of a walk appealed to me. I’d had little opportunity to step outside of the four walls that made up Clarendon.

“Yes, ma’am.”

In the hallway, Lady Leith went one way and I went the other. I kept my steps quick as I made my way up to my room. It was the same size as the one I’d used in the Burnham house in London, but the view from the small window was infinitely better. The tiny space felt more like home than any place I’d been in since I left Faircroft house.

I took my spencer jacket from my wardrobe and slipped it on. Hopefully, with the sun shining, it would not become too hot on the walk. For the chance to have some fresh air, I’d take the risk.

Before I left my room, I ran my fingers over my father's pocket watch. It was a reminder of the time that continued to march on. Although I knew I had to find some way to get to the bottom of my family's death or accept defeat, I was so tired.

Tired of confusion, lies, and danger.

One would not expect peace and rest would be found as a lady's maid, but such had been the case. At least, it did when one was not employed by a selfish woman who loved to abuse those around her, with a brother who thought a maid should accept his attention without protest.

Shaking my head to clear away those troubling thoughts, I made my way down the servants staircase and took the long way around to the hall. Even though the corridors used by servants were not as elegant as the main areas of the house, they were clean, neat, and well cared for.

Lady Leith was already in the hall, and she smiled as I approached. "Ah, there you are," she said. She bent down, picked up a basket, and held it out to me. "Let's be off. We don't have a long distance to go."

Since we'd left Bath, my newest employer's spirits had lifted more and more each day. A sparkle had come to her eyes and her cheeks flushed with the enjoyment of life. I suspected the cause to be the distance between herself and her mother-in-law.

Of course, there was one other matter that might have added to her delight with life.

"Are you sure a long walk is wise, my lady?" I asked as I followed Lady Leith past the stables. In fact, the more I thought about it, I ought to have queried her *before* we stepped foot out of the manor. "You wouldn't want to tire yourself."

Since taking on the position of her personal maid, I'd come to know more about the young woman, who was not much older than myself. She appreciated plain speaking, though I may have overstepped my boundaries with this particular question.

"I am more than capable of a walk, Nelson," Lady Leith said, glancing over her shoulder. To my relief, her tone was not irritated but amused. "Besides, it is far too beautiful a day to remain inside. Why should we not enjoy it?"

As I wasn't about to argue with her, I decided to allow the matter to drop. I would simply remain as close as I could so if she did become unsteady, I would be able to catch and support her. For

a moment, I wondered what was in the basket she'd handed to me. It wasn't exactly heavy, but it wasn't empty either. Who was the intended recipient?

Lady Leith led the way past the massive maze that took up most of the grounds. On my next half day, I hoped to explore and solve it. At least it would be a puzzle that did not have some importance attached to it.

Although my family's estate hadn't been as large as Clarendon, I couldn't help but see the similarities between them. Both were built of stone with many windows. The grounds were well-tended, though there had been no maze at my childhood home. There had been countless times I'd made a walk such as the one I was on with Lady Leith, with the sun shining overhead and the scent of growing things on the wind.

"You seem happy." Lady Leith's statement brought me back to the task at hand. "I think that is the first time I've seen you smile."

"I've smiled before," I said in protest.

The lady laughed softly, her dark brown eyes sparkling. "Perhaps, but not with your eyes, Nelson. Right now, you look happy. I assume you've spent time in the country before?"

"Most of my life." It was difficult to make the admission. I had never spoken of my background with any of my other employers. Mrs. Burnham and Rose Dunbar were too self-centred to be granted such confidence, and Eugenia Burnham, as sweet as her temperament was, had been occupied with untangling her emotions and hopes for the future.

"Just how did you end up in Bath then?"

Surprised, I stared at her for a moment. The expression of curiosity on her face was sincere, and she'd slowed her steps so that she was by my side instead of ahead of me, which would have been more proper. "I...answered an ad," I said, choosing my words with care. "I thought to see some of the world while I could."

"Of course. I suppose that is one benefit to being in a position such as you have," Lady Leith said with a nod. "Though I don't imagine you expected to endure someone such as Rose Dunbar."

"True." I appreciated that Lady Leith had never questioned me about what I had been subjected to when I was in the Dunbar house. She must have heard about Daniel Dunbar's 'injuries' and the rumours that the maid—me—had inflicted on the man, but she never questioned me for the details.

Perhaps she knew the kind of man he was and believed, as few did, that I had acted in the only way I could.

“So, before you were in Bath, where did you live?”

These were the questions I’d thought to get before she hired me. I suppose I should have expected them to come at some point.

“London, your ladyship. I was in the employ of a lady by name of Burnham.”

“Burnham? I believe my husband and I know the family, at least in passing.”

That, of course, did not surprise me. All the families of society knew each other somehow, with many connected through marriage.

“I do remember hearing that Miss Eugenia Burnham was engaged to be married,” Lady Leith continued, her tone thoughtful. “In fact, if I remember correctly, I believe her wedding day was last month and she is now Mrs. Gerard Landon.”

Happiness swelled in my heart. Eugenia Burnham had been newly engaged when I left her father’s house. I hadn’t known when she would be married, but I knew she was happy with her choice. She was away from her domineering mother and had begun a new chapter in life.

“I’m glad to hear it. Miss Burnham was a sweet girl.”

Lady Leith glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. “She underwent an incredible transformation this past season from what I have heard. One day she is known as pretty enough, and the next she is declared an incarnation of Aphrodite. However did she manage it, I wonder.”

Aphrodite? Now that particular rumour hadn’t reached my ears and really was an exaggeration. “It’s astonishing what a new hairstyle and a change in one’s garments can do for a young lady’s confidence,” I said with a smile, remembering the lengths I had gone to help Eugenia.

“I’d wondered if you’d had a hand in it.” Lady Leith laughed softly. “I remember how overshadowed Miss Burnham always seemed to be with as many ribbons and adornments that were on her gowns. I take it those were not her choice?”

Did she expect me to tell tales about the Burnhams? Perhaps it was everything I’d gone through as a lady’s maid, but questioning always set me on edge. “An unskilled seamstress with no eye for what flatters a lady can be a trial,” I said in as vague a way as I could manage.

“Too true.” Her tone had a cool note to it, but before I had time to work out why, Lady Leith’s steps quickened. “Come along, Nelson.”

Had something I said unsettled her? Why had her mood changed so quickly? Puzzled, I hurried after her. It would seem I would have to be a little careful when it came to getting to know my newest employer.



TO MY SURPRISE, LADY Leith’s destination was a small cottage hidden among some trees. We’d passed three other tenant homes to get to this one. There was no farm nearby to support those who lived there, and I knew the cottage was lived in from the clean laundry that hung between two of the lines.

“I’ll take the basket now,” Lady Leith said, lifting her right hand and waving. Though I didn’t see anyone in sight, someone must have been watching from a window, for the front door swung open. A young man, his clothing of a much better quality than I would have expected, came rushing out.

He couldn’t have been much younger than me. His brown hair was a bit longer than was currently fashionable. When he reached Lady Leith, I could see that he was a head taller than her, and she was above average in height.

With enthusiasm, he embraced Lady Leith, nearly lifting her off her feet. The movement knocked her bonnet back, revealing her fair hair. Then, once the young man set her down, he took a step back and offered a formal bow. His brown eyes were bright with delight, though there was a flash of curiosity when he glanced at me. On closer inspection, I would have put him at about twenty years, if that.

Lady Leith let out a laugh and held her hand out to take the basket from me. She then passed it to the young man. Immediately, he pulled the cloth that had covered the contents and his grin widened as he saw what was inside.

“Simon has an insatiable thirst for books,” Lady Leith said, without glancing at me. She reached over and put her hand on the young man’s arm. “Allow me to introduce you to my brother-in-law, Simon Leith.”

Mr. Simon Leith lifted his gaze and then glanced from his sister-in-law to me. “Pleased to meet you, sir,” I said, wondering why he

lived so far from the estate house and in such a small cottage. Why hadn't I heard about him before this point?

To my surprise, he gave a nod and then returned his focus to Lady Leith. He made a gesture in my direction. "Your friend?" he asked. His voice was a strange monotone which I would not have expected for a young man.

"My maid," Lady Leith said, keeping her gaze on Mr. Leith. "Nelson."

The young man raised an eyebrow and then dropped his gaze back to the basket. He pulled a book out and began to examine it. His grin widened, which made him look even younger than before.

"My lady?" I asked, confused about what was happening.

"Simon cannot hear, Nelson," Lady Leith said, her voice quiet. "He does not intend to be rude."

"The thought never crossed my mind." In fact, I was once again reminded of home. Although I hadn't had a sibling who was deaf, there was a family on the estate who had. However they had kept their child with them, not sent him away as though he were something to be ashamed of.

I watched as the pair communicated in an elaborate game of charades and miming. They seemed to know each other well and, if I'd been a passer-by, I would have taken them for siblings. Which, of course, they were by marriage, but such closeness did not always happen when a woman married into a family.

Still, it made my heart ache with sadness. Seeing them together and happy made me remember the times I'd been with my brother. I missed Jonathan more than ever. He may have kept secrets from me and after my adventure in Bath, I felt maybe I hadn't known him as well as I once thought I did. Jonathan had been my best friend, though, whatever the secrets he'd kept.

Blinking rapidly, I forced back the tears that threatened to fall. At least, I had the comfort of knowing Jonathan's killer couldn't hurt anyone again. Mr. Ingram's death had given me that small comfort.

The cottage door squeaked as it opened. Startled by the sound, I shifted my gaze to the small structure. "Would you be wanting some tea, my lady?" an older woman, her hair a greying brown, asked as she dried her hands on a towel. She frowned as though she disapproved of what she was seeing.

"Not today, Miss Webber," Lady Leith said, true regret in her

voice. "Perhaps when I return."

Miss Webber gave a nod, and then her gaze shifted back to me. Suspicion crossed her face as her eyes narrowed. I resisted the urge to take a step back. Spinning on her heel, the woman entered the house and closed the door.

Clasping Mr. Leith's hands in hers, Lady Leith went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. He returned the affectionate gesture, leaning down to do so, and then opened up the book in his hand. With a laugh, my employer turned and walked away.

"Come along, Nelson," she said. "He will be occupied with his book for some time."

My mind still on the mistrust Miss Webber had shown, I followed without even thinking about it. Once more, I had so many questions to join ones that had gone unanswered.

"Sir Horace told me Simon came down with a fever when he was only six years old and when the fever passed, his brother couldn't hear anymore."

Surprised by the random statement, I glanced over at Lady Leith. "I've heard of it happening before," I said, since she seemed to be waiting for a response from me. "Mr. Leith seems to be doing well despite it?"

A slight smile flickered on her face. "I believe so. He would be better if he were at Clarendon House."

"How long has he been with Miss Webber?"

"Since he was seven." A frown creased Lady Leith's forehead. "The dowager felt it would be best for her other children if he were elsewhere. Miss Webber was their nurse, and she took on the responsibility in exchange for the cottage. It is hers for the duration of her life."

It wasn't hard to believe that of the dowager. Any deviation from what she considered proper would not be tolerated. I had only to look at how she treated her own daughter-in-law, who was a sweet lady and had never done anything improper, to know she would put her poor son as far from her as possible. No doubt she would prefer that everyone forget Mr. Leith ever existed.

"At least he has you to brighten his day. The young gentleman enjoys reading?"

Lady Leith gave a nod. "He was fortunate enough to have already begun to learn before he lost his hearing. I cannot imagine how difficult it would have been to teach him how to read after, if

he didn't have a foundation to build on."

I could well believe it. Remembering the tenant family on my father's estate and how they hadn't tried to give him an education beyond how to use the tools of a carpenter, I was glad that Mr. Leith hadn't had that particular trouble and wouldn't have to provide for himself.

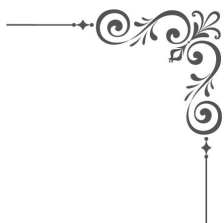
"You look rather sad, Nelson. What are you thinking of?"

"Oh, just a memory. A family on my...well, near where I grew up had a son who was born deaf," I said, catching myself before I gave away too much. "He was taught carpentry by his father and became very good, if I remember right. I don't think he was ever taught how to read or do figures."

"I don't suppose many have that opportunity if they are not from a well born family." This was said with a sigh, and Lady Leith shook her head. "At least the young man was not ignored and had a trade to occupy him. He could not doubt his family's love for him."

There seemed to be nothing I could say to that. The silence persisted until we reached the main house. In the same moment, we both saw the carriage that was now sitting in front. Who had come visiting? Lady Leith hadn't mentioned...

"Oh, it seems the dowager has arrived," Lady Leith said, interrupting my thoughts. Her voice flat and resigned. "Isn't that...perfect."



Chapter Two

While Lady Leith hurried to greet her mother-in-law, I went around to the servants' entrance. No one was in sight, no doubt rushing to ensure that the dowager's room was ready for her. Unhindered, I was able to make my way up to my own room to remove my pelisse and then continued with my own duties.

The first task I needed to do was arrange the flowers before they wilted too much. As I worked with the blossoms, my mind wandered. There had been a second reason, besides my desire to leave Bath as soon as possible. Rest had brought with it the energy and desire to see my quest to its completion.

I knew that my brother had intercepted messages from someone I only knew as 'H', and from the way Jonathan had referred to this person, it was someone well-known to him. Since I was well aware that I didn't know all aspects of my brother's life, it had been hard to know whether I had accounted for all his close acquaintances whose names begin with the letter H.

Sir Horace Leith was one of those people. However, he'd left for parts unknown almost as soon as we'd arrived at Clarendon. Determining a man's disposition and past was difficult when he was not available to be observed.

Of course, I could not forget that 'H' could refer to a man's surname and not his Christian name. Mr. Oswyn Harper had been my first thought on that note. He had turned up so often over the past few months, it was difficult not to number him among those who were suspect.

There was also a John Hampton who had been another school companion of Jonathan. He lived somewhere in the North, if I remembered correctly. What had become of him? Had he kept up correspondence with my brother at all?

Heaving a sigh, I realized I had completed my easy task and I had no excuse to put off the laundry. Laundering the more delicate items of any of my employers was one of the many things I really did not enjoy. My hands were raw from the soap and hot water. It would take weeks for my poor hands to return to their former softness.

It was another task that allowed me a little too much time to think. My great-aunt Beth's letters as of late had been filled with pleas for me to give up my self-appointed mission. When I thought of how impossible it would be to find 'H' and I was faced with tedious tasks, I was tempted to do as she asked.

But then, what a waste my year would have been! Every hardship I'd faced, the abuse from unpleasant employers, would have been for nothing. This worry was foremost in my mind as I made my way down the servant's staircase to where I could—

“....fall down around you and you wouldn't even notice.”

With a gasp, I lifted my gaze to find a rail thin woman in front of me. An amused smile on her face kept her from appearing severe. Mrs. Horner was the housekeeper at Clarendon House, and was an amiable woman who had made me welcome.

“I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm afraid I wasn't listening,” I said with a slight laugh. I adjusted my grip on my basket, grateful I had made such a cake of myself as to drop it.

“I know. I said the walls of the house would fall down and you wouldn't even notice,” she said with a laugh. “What has your head up in the clouds, Nelson?”

She was a garrulous person, and I'd learned the entirety of her life within two days of meeting her. While it was refreshing to not be the object of disdain, it made me all the more careful with what I said.

“I saw that the dowager had arrived,” I said, choosing a topic that had nothing to do with me. “I had not heard she was expected for a visit.”

Mrs. Horner shook her head, discontent visible in her expression for a moment. “No one knew, but I shouldn't be surprised. She has a habit of returning without warning. I suppose that's the prerogative

of the gentry, to do as they please whenever they wish. At least, she brought her own abigail so you won't have to look after her needs."

I hadn't even thought of that possibility! "Yes, that is something for me to be thankful for." Just before leaving Bath, I'd overheard the dowager's opinion of me, someone she had not personally approved of.

"Did you and Lady Leith have a nice walk?"

"We did." On a whim, I decided to continue on that subject. "She took me to Miss Webber's cottage and introduced me to young Mr. Leith. I had no idea the baron had a younger brother."

The woman's brown eyes lit up. "Oh, the sweet boy," she said, a note of affection in her voice. "I make sure the cook sends him treats every week. Goodness knows Miss Webber only provides the bare necessities when Master Simon deserves some loving attention. Why if I'd known where my lady was going, I would have prepared a basket."

I assured her that Lady Leith had done so. "Well, I won't keep you," Mrs. Horner said, her tone becoming brisk. "We all have our tasks to finish, and with the dowager back in the house, we would be wise to be on our toes. She is a particular woman and isn't afraid to let her complaints be known."

It was the closest thing to criticism I'd heard her speak. She continued on her way and I went mine. Once I finished the wash, I had one of Lady Leith's evening gowns in need of a repair on the hem. It was one of my employer's favourites, and I had the feeling she was going to want to be in her best looks with her mother-in-law in the house.



"SHE SAYS SHE'S TIRED of the society in Bath." Lady Leith's tone was annoyed as she spoke. She frowned at her reflection in the mirror, "She's never tired of Bath, so I cannot believe she has suddenly developed an aversion to her friends."

I held my silence as I slipped the last hair pin in place in her hair. "What could bring her all the way back to Clarendon?" she continued, a note of confusion entering her voice. "Every time she visits, she has only complaints and criticism."

"Perhaps she wished to ensure you and Sir Horace had arrived safely," I said, reaching for some rosebuds to place among her brown curls. "After all, you were unwell often while you were in

Bath.”

To my surprise, a smile appeared on Lady Leith’s lips. “I have not forgotten,” she said, softly. After a moment, she shook her head. “That is a nice sentiment, but no. The dowager has never been concerned with my well-being, unless it somehow reflects badly on the family name. No, I am certain there is something else that brought her here this time.”

“And you cannot come out and ask her?” A strange question coming from me given my position. “Perhaps such bluntness might startle her into giving you the truth.”

Lady Leith laughed, pulling me from my thoughts. “Oh, you are refreshing, Nelson,” she said. She twisted her head from side to side, inspecting my work. “However am I going to survive a dinner alone with her? What will we talk about?”

“I am certain you are more than up for the challenge.”

Of all the young ladies I’d encountered since becoming a lady’s maid, Lady Leith was the most mature and confident. She’d had time in society and had been the wife of a baron for over a year. Her mother-in-law may be a termagant, an opinion I kept to myself, but Lady Leith could more than hold her own, even if she doubted herself.

With a sigh, Lady Leith stood up. “I’m glad one of us is certain about something.” She thanked me and then walked out of the room.

If only she knew just how much there was that I wasn’t certain about!

It only took a matter of minutes to return the room to its spotless state. Before I returned it to the wardrobe, I inspected the day dress she’d changed out of, making sure there were no stains or tears that needed attention. My task was made easier whenever I caught small things before they became big ones.

As it would be some time before Lady Leith would require my attention and my stomach rumbled, I left the dressing room for my own chamber and the tray of food that awaited me. The solitude that had suited me when I arrived was becoming rather tiresome, but what could I do about it?

In the narrow corridor, I encountered an unfamiliar woman. She was tall and thin, perhaps even more slender than Mrs. Horner. Her expression was one of disapproval and condescension. I may not have known her but, apparently, she knew me. “You are Julie

Nelson,” she said, her lip curling up.

“I am,” I said warily. I may not have known her name, but it wasn’t difficult to guess who she was. “You are the dowager’s abigail.”

“I am Mary Hanson,” she said haughtily.

“Welcome back to Clarendon, Miss Hanson. I hope you had a pleasant journey.”

She raised her chin. “You think you’re so superior that you are the one to welcome me back?” she demanded, her tone offended. “Of all the impertinent ideas! I have served the Leith family longer than you’ve even been alive.”

Taken aback by the exaggeration and attack, I stared at her. I’d meant to be polite and welcoming. “I’m sorry to have offended you, Miss Hanson.” The last thing I wanted was to have an enemy in the household. I’d endured that before and had no interest in repeating the experience.

The woman gave a derisive sniff. “Once you’ve had some experience as a lady’s maid, you’ll understand your proper place, Nelson.”

“If I am not mistaken, Miss Hanson, as I am maid to the mistress of the house, I have done nothing to overstep my bounds,” I said, struggling to keep my tone even. I didn’t want to fight, but I wasn’t about to let her lord it over me. Once she started, she wouldn’t cease. “Good evening.”

Her eyes widened. “Well, I never! My lady shall hear of this impertinence I promise you!”

“If you feel you ought to advise Lady Leith, you are welcome to do so.”

For a moment, she stared at me and then she stalked away, her back rigid with outrage. Letting out a sigh, I continued on my way.

Given what I knew of my employer, she would not listen to the close servant of her mother-in-law. In fact, I was interested in just how Lady Leith would handle Miss Hanson approaching her.

When I entered my chamber, I spotted a thick missives resting on my supper tray. Though I was hungry, my appetite increased after the walk earlier in the day, I snatched up the letter first. Knowing the thickness indicated more than one letter was enclosed, I settled on the edge of my bed to read them.

The first was from my great-aunt Beth. I briefly scanned the familiar writing, searching for anything besides admonition to

return to Faircroft. It was toward the end that I came across a sentence that made me sit up.

“Your Uncle Frederick says he is returning, and I believe he truly means it this time. A man his age must cease his wanderings and return home. What a relief it will be to have him back home.”

Breathing out, I let the letter fall to my lap. Uncle Frederick? Returning to London? “Why now? After five years, why did he have to return now?”

My guardian would want to know where I was, and I doubted he would be as understanding about my charade as Aunt Beth had been. Though disapproving and continually urging me to return, my great aunt had nonetheless kept my secret.

Uncle Frederick could throw me into Bethlehem Hospital if he so chose.

A glance at the second letter revealed it to be written by my uncle’s hand. I broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

“My dear niece,

It will not be long before I am once again at home in Faircroft. Aunt Beth is correct. I have been pursuing my own interests too long, and have neglected you in the process.

Young Mr. Douglas’ death is unfortunate. I have other acquaintances, though, so we shall simply find another admirable young man....”

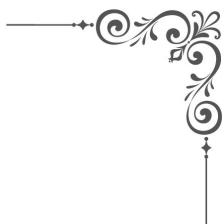
Astonished, I stared at the words. Who ought I to be more angry with? Aunt Beth for convincing Uncle Frederick to return, knowing it would force me to end my mission unresolved? Or my uncle, for thinking he would be oh-so-helpful in seeking a match for me among his literary friends?

I couldn’t bring myself to read the rest of the letter. My uncle knew me not at all. How could he? Since becoming my guardian, he had spent all of a week in the same house and before that he had visited only a handful of times. How did he think he was going to arrange a marriage for me when he didn’t know my temperament, my likes and dislikes, or what would make me happy?

“What am I to do?

Of course, I knew already. In what little time I had left, I had to prove Sir Horace’s innocence or guilt. With the other acquaintances of my brother whose names began with ‘H’, I would have to devise a different way to approach them. Or, I would have to give it up as a lost cause.

Well, a Sinclair had never backed down from a challenge before and I would not be the first to do so.



Chapter Three

Lady Leith's eyes were rimmed with red when she entered her dressing room later that night. "My lady, what's wrong?" I asked in concern. Had dinner gone that badly?

She managed a smile as she removed her pearl necklace. "After such a long journey, my mother-in-law's nerves are—" She paused and sighed before continuing with only the slightest tremor in her voice, "Well, let's just say she is not at her most charming at the moment. She ought to have rested and taken a tray in her room, but the dowager does what she will."

"I'm sorry, my lady." I began to remove the hair pins since there was really nothing else I could say.

"Oh, it's not your fault, Nelson." Lady Leith closed her eyes with another sigh. "I do wish my husband were home. He calms her and laughs off the worst of her criticisms. However, I don't know when he will return."

It was the first time she'd mentioned such a thing. Was this a common occurrence? When I had first encountered Lady Leith, her husband had been away. "Perhaps his business will conclude sooner than expected and he will return," I said, trying to infuse hope and confidence in my voice. "You might send him a note and explain what has happened. Ask him to return."

A loving husband wouldn't hesitate to do so, would he? I only had my father as an example and I knew he would never have left my mother alone to face a distressing situation.

"When I don't even know what business he is on, it would be

incredible if I had any idea whether that was possible or not.” Lady Leith opened her eyes, and the expression in them was bleak. “He never confides in me. Whatever business it is that takes him from Clarendon, I know not what it is.”

Sir Horace had secret business, then? How strange. As much as my heart went out to Lady Leith, my mind couldn’t help but see the possible connection to the mysterious ‘H’.

“Has this always been the case?” I asked. Was it terrible of me to take advantage of the confidence between a lady and her maid?

“Yes, and I suppose it was foolish of me to think anything would change after we were married.” Lady Leith stood up so that we could remove her fine evening gown. “The dowager believes that a proper baroness would be able to keep her husband at home.”

“Surely she did not say that!” I said as I pulled the gown over her head. A man was permitted to do as he wished, to a point, and a woman’s opinion carried no weight. At least, as far I had seen, such was the way of the world. To insinuate otherwise was ridiculous. How was Lady Leith to keep her husband by her side if his responsibilities, wherever they were, kept him away?

“Well, she didn’t say those exact words, but her comments make it clear what she is thinking.” In only her chemise, Lady Leith turned away. “After two years, I ought to be used to her opinion, but every time I am in the room with her, she manages to find something new to make me feel inferior.”

I’d encountered ladies of a similar nature during my one Season, however, my mother had been beside me to give me confidence. Where was Lady Leith’s mother? She had never mentioned any family. Did she have no friend to support her?

“At first, I thought time, perhaps a b—” She broke off and shook her head. “Well, I hoped he would come to confide in me as we became closer, but I was wrong,” she continued. Her shoulders rose and fell as she sighed. “I’m sure I’m not the first wife to complain of such things, but what can I do besides being a good, patient wife at home?”

For a moment, her hand rested on her stomach. As I helped her into her nightgown, I remembered the times I’d seen her ill in Bath. My mind also went to what I’d learned about an expectant mother from friends who’d been so blessed.

Was Lady Leith with child as I had suspected?

Of course, I had not been in my position long enough to ask

such an impertinent question, but it was a matter I would have to keep my eye on.

If Sir Horace was the man involved in the treasonous behaviour my brother had been looking into, what would it do to Lady Leith if she were, at long last, expecting a child? Did I have it in me to ruin her reputation, her life, after she'd been so kind to me?

"Is something wrong, Nelson?"

Shaking myself from my thoughts, I picked up the hairbrush and lied through my teeth once again. "Not at all, my lady. I am just surprised, nothing more."

"So, you see, I could not even send a note if I wished to," Lady Leith said with a sigh. "I would not know where to send it. Of course, the last thing I wish is to give the impression that I am incapable of handling matters here. My husband must know he can rely on me."

I couldn't help but feel for her. If only there were some way to help her.

"And you can rely on me, my lady."

Her smile was forced as she met my gaze in the mirror. "Of course, Nelson. I am relieved I have you on my side. I shall need all the help I can get to manage the dowager."



WHEN I WAS BROUGHT my breakfast the next morning, I made an attempt to garner some insight into the Leith family. I'd refrained while I gathered my thoughts and strength, but now I felt such information would help me. To my surprise, my simple question was met with umbrage from Fanny the maid.

She would not spread tales or gossip about the family to me or any other person.

Her loyalty was as admirable as it was amusing. By the time that I assured her that I only wanted to understand how the family and estate worked, she had been too long in my room. She left without telling me anything at all.

Disappointed, I sipped my tea and tried to formulate some kind of a plan. Somehow, I had to find evidence proving either Sir Horace's innocence or his guilt.

There was an office, I knew, that the steward made use of. I had not made an attempt to enter it yet. I'd assumed Sir Horace would take any important papers with him on his journey, but perhaps

that wasn't the case. Might a search produce something of use to me?

How would I manage to slip in undetected?

I mulled it over as I went to Lady Leith. Thankfully, she did not seem to notice my distracted state, and she did not ask anything out of the ordinary for me.

Once she was dressed in a pretty pale pink morning gown, the lady went off to her sitting room where correspondence awaited her attention. Writing letters to her friends and family seemed to be the one task my employer took delight in. She would spend hours at her desk. With so little change from day to day, I wondered what she wrote of.

Did she truly have that many acquaintances to write to each time she sat down? Or was it merely one way to avoid having to entertain the implacable dowager?

With Lady Leith occupied, I gathered my courage and left the dressing room. The hallway was quiet, the maids having completed their work in the main part of the house. With any luck, I would not encounter anyone.

As I walked, I kept my head high and my steps even. If I had the appearance of knowing where I was going and a task I wished to accomplish, it was less likely I would be stopped by an inquiring servant. As it was, I saw no one from Lady Leith's dressing room to the hallway off of which Sir Horace's office was located.

In fact, I was steps from the closed door, and thought I had succeeded in my self-appointed task. A voice halted me.

"Are you searching for something, miss?"

Startled, I spun around. An unfamiliar gentleman, short in height with plain brown hair, stood a few yards away from me. His attire was simple and practical. In his hand were several letters. He had to be Sir Horace's steward.

"Are you lost?" he asked, his tone impatient. "Who are you?"

"Not precisely," I said, thinking quickly. "I am Lady Leith's maid, Miss Nelson. I have been trying to become better acquainted with the house so that I can get about quickly if my lady requires me to carry a message or some such task."

The man raised his eyebrow, his expression sceptical. "Indeed. I cannot imagine what circumstances would require such a message but I admire your...well, I shall call it your dedication to being ready for any occasion."

There was a slight note of sarcasm in his voice that made me straighten my shoulders. "And you are?" Knowing who had access to Sir Horace's correspondence might be important, and I was astonished he hadn't done the polite thing and introduced himself when I had offered my own name.

"Richard Stone, Sir Horace's steward." He spoke as though it should have been obvious, and he gave a bow in an almost mocking fashion. "At last, we meet. It has been some time since Lady Leith has had a maid to attend to her."

My delight at being correct in my guess was overshadowed by my annoyance at his mannerisms. Perhaps I would be able to get some information from him in spite of it. "At last? My lady and I have not been here so long for that phrase to be applicable, I think, Mr. Stone."

He gave a nod in the most condescending manner. "Indeed, one might think that, but you have been like a ghost. I was beginning to think you were a figment of her ladyship's imagination, but all in the household go on about how diligent you are in tending to your mistress' needs."

What exactly was he trying to imply? I'd expected the other servants in the house to gossip and wonder about me, the newcomer who kept to herself. Mr. Stone was trying to make it sound as though I had failed in some way.

"I am glad my work speaks for me," I said, holding myself to my highest height. Of course I took pride in what I did and if it had been noticed, well and good. "Lady Leith has had no complaints."

His gaze moved over me reminded me of Mr. Dunbar, probing and impertinent. It set me on edge and I wondered what he was thinking. "Well, it isn't as though she has anyone to compare you to," he said, his lips curved in a slight smile.

How dare he? Did he think I would take that insult? I was in no mood to verbally spar with him and my excursion was not having the results I'd desired. "I will keep that in mind, Mr. Stone. Now I will not keep you from your work, Mr. Stone," I said, eager to put an end to the conversation. "I know you must be busy with Sir Horace away. I'm sure Lady Leith is looking forward to your next report. Good day."

His jaw dropped as I swept past him. I tried to banish the feeling of victory that shot through over having startled him. How was I going to get into the study with Mr. Stone lurking about?

Frustrated at being thwarted and annoyed that he felt free to insult Lady Leith, I returned to the dressing room. As I entered, a hat sailed in front of my face. Experience from my previous employer made me come to a halt. While I knew I could not possibly have been the intended target, it was better to be cautious.

Lady Leith was not one to throw things when angered. In fact, I could not recall any time when she'd even shown her temper. What must have happened in the hour since she'd left the dressing room to provoke this kind of reaction?

"My lady?" I said with no little caution. "Is something amiss?"

She spun away from the wall she'd been facing. Colour was high in her cheeks and her shoulders moved as though she was breathing deeply. "Amiss? What could possibly be amiss, Nelson? I am sure it is a common occurrence for a lady to be outmanoeuvred and—and managed in her own house!"

Stopping to hide my flinch, I picked up the battered straw hat. I suppose the dowager being difficult was reason enough for Lady Leith to need to vent her anger. When I lifted my gaze, the woman appeared to be close to tears.

"What am I to do?" she asked, sinking onto the chair in front of the dressing table. "I have no wish for company at the moment, but how can I stop her? She has decided to host a party in three weeks. I do not even know if my husband will have returned by then! What will he think if he returns and I am entertaining without him?"

Many had been the time I had heard tell of mothers-in-law who would refuse to give way to their son's new wife. I had thought myself fortunate that Henry Bladen had a kind mother who was fond of me. There would have been no such trouble between us.

That thought, however, belonged in the past as a naive schoolgirl's dream.

"If you state plainly that you will not allow a party and then forbid the servants to cooperate with her, would that not put an end to the matter?" I asked, pulling my thoughts from what might have been. "As you say, this is your home now and you are the mistress."

She gave a scoff. "What would be the point? I am convinced that at least half of the staff are loyal to the dowager. She was mistress of the house for twenty nine years before I arrived. They look to her for direction."

"But since Sir Horace is the current baron, and you his lady, you are the one with the authority to dismiss anyone who disobeys

you.” It was a ruthless suggestion, but the situation seemed to call for such an attack. “Make it clear you will do so. Be a force to be reckoned with.”

It seemed simple enough to me, but she shook her head. “Dismiss someone whose family has served the Leith family for a hundred some years? I would make myself even more of an outsider. My husband would be disappointed in me and hire them on again once he returned.”

Again, she had a point. Goodness, how was a wife supposed to navigate such a convoluted situation? “What if you tell the dowager that your husband would be displeased with such a plan? Surely, she would respect her son’s wishes.”

“I appreciate that you are trying to help, Nelson, but it is hopeless,” she said, closing her eyes. She brought her hand up to rub her forehead. “I would not be at all surprised that when I join her for dinner, she will tell me she has made the guest list and has begun to write out the invitations.”

Who knew what kind of companions the dowager would invite to her party. Naturally, the idea of there being strangers—or even worse, someone who knew Juliet Sinclair!—in the house filled me with dread. There had to be some way to control. Maybe...

“Well, if you cannot stop her, perhaps you can beat her at her own game,” I said slowly.

Lifting her head, Lady Leith blinked, a frown creasing her forehead. “Beat her? What do you mean?”

“If there is no way to avoid a party, make your own guest list. Invite your friends, who will be on your side, and you can enjoy yourself.”

After a moment and just when I was ready to believe I had gone too far, she let out a laugh. “And what would stop her from ignoring my list in favour of her own?”

“At the moment, the dowager has only her hand for any correspondence she wishes to write. Though you said she might even now be penning the invitations, she has no companion to assist with the task. It will take her some time to finish them all.”

“And you think I could write my own invitations faster?” There was no mistaking the doubt in Lady Leith’s voice. “You forget I have no companion to help lighten the load.”

“I don’t wish you to think I am bragging, but I am reported to have a fine hand, my lady. Between us, invitations could be written

in a trice.”

“You make a convincing argument, Nelson.” Lady Leith leaned back, her expression thoughtful. “Your gift for strategy quite puts me in mind of the great Lord Nelson. Are you a relation of his by any chance?”

“I can tell you in most emphatic terms that I am not.”

She didn’t seem to hear me. “I suppose if I must endure company, it may as well be those I can tolerate. For the most part, of course. I’m sure the dowager will insist on a few of her own close friends being invited.”

“Does she have friends, then? I am astounded!” The words left my lips before I knew I was even thinking them. I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Lady Leith laughed, and then appeared ashamed. “Nelson, you ought not be so impertinent.”

Embarrassed, I lowered my hand. “Forgive me, my lady. I did not mean any offense.”

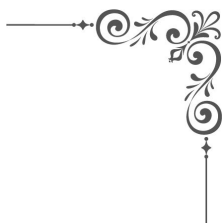
“I’m sure you didn’t. Finish whatever tasks require your attention, and then join me in my sitting room,” she said with a note of determination entering her voice. She rose from the chair. “I shall decide on the guest list.”

I barely managed to murmur an acknowledgement before she strode from the room. Lightly bouncing the hat against my hand, I shook my head. Why did I allow myself to be pulled into helping those around me?

“Right. House party,” I said aloud. “Members of society who may or may not know me in this house. They wouldn’t possibly pay attention to a maid.”

Unless they were a blackmailing traitor like Mr. Ingram who kept a sharp look out for abnormalities.

“What could possibly go wrong?”



Chapter Four

“Miss Nelson! Miss Nelson!”

Rubbing my sore wrist, I lifted my gaze from the open book on my bed. I thought there was a note of panic in the young voice, which was unusual. “Yes? Come in,” I called out.

The door swung open and Fanny entered. She wrung her hands together, her eyes wide with fright. What had scared her? Surely she didn’t think *I* would be upset at the interruption. “My lady wishes her shawl.”

Her shawl? Was that all? Why was that cause for such an upset? Had the dowager done something to make a seemingly small thing into a failure? “I will fetch it for Lady Leith directly.”

Fanny bobbed a curtsy, but her expression didn’t show any relief. She rushed off before I could question her. Shaking my head, I left my book open, hoping to return to it in a matter of minutes. I’d expected to have several hours to myself after sending Lady Leith off to dinner.

I went down to the dressing room. It was as I had left it. Mindful of the mauve dinner gown Lady Leith had chosen for the evening, I selected a cashmere shawl from the wardrobe. I draped it over my arm and started down to the drawing room where I was sure to find the ladies.

The dowager’s voice could be heard well before I reached the door. “...do not consider my feelings? When Horace returns from wherever he flees to on every opportunity, you can be sure I intend on telling him everything.”

It was a struggle to keep my face passive as I slipped through the doorway. Lady Leith had given me a good idea of the dowager's ability for the dramatic, oppressed attitude, but this was something else entirely. My employer must have the patience of a saint to have gone so long without her temper snapping.

"You said this morning that you wished for company and that you intended to invite a party," Lady Leith said in a quiet tone. She glanced over and her gaze caught mine. "Oh, thank you, Nelson. I felt a slight chill."

As I stepped forward, the dowager's beady eyes narrowed. "So this is the creature you were taken in by," she said, her tone disdainful. "I hope you are keeping track of the valuables in the house."

"I wasn't taken in, ma'am," Lady Leith said stiffly. She allowed me to drape the shawl over her shoulders. "Nelson's references were excellent and she came highly recommended. I've found her to be an excellent maid."

"Hmm. Excellent references, you say? Then, why did I learn she worked for that upstart Dunbar family? And, I might add, she was dismissed under very suspicious circumstances. I highly doubt they provided an 'excellent reference.'"

Lady Leith's eyes flicked to me, the hint of a question contained there. "You know how people gossip. A person cannot believe half of what they are told."

"Did you or did you not attempt to kill the young Dunbar boy?" This pointed question was directed at me. Or so I assumed since she was still staring at me.

I held myself with as much dignity as I could muster. "I did not," I said honestly. After all, he had attacked me and though I had been forced to stab him, I hadn't intended to take his life. The wound hadn't been life threatening. Not unless he'd had an incompetent doctor tend to him.

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

"If you had no intention of believing what she said, why did you ask her in the first place?" Lady Leith demanded, her tone irritated. She strode to the pianoforte. "Shall I play for us? It will take your mind off of your complaints."

"No, I do not wish to hear your playing," the dowager said irritably. "You only wish to distract me from the matter of the party, not entertain me. What names did you put on your guest list?"

Upstarts and families of little account, I would wager.”

Her hand on the musical instrument, Lady Leith heaved a sigh. “If it will set your mind at ease, Nelson will bring the guest list from my desk.” Over her shoulder, she gave me a nod.

“Right away, my lady,” I said with the appropriate curtsy.

As I hurried from the room, I heard the older woman begin her objections once again. Breathing out, I went down the hallway to where Lady Leith and I had written invitations earlier in the day. Lady Leith had left her guest list on top of her desk in case an adjustment needed to be made at last minute.

We had worked all afternoon on writing the invitations. My gaze moved across the list and the names written there: Mr. Alfred Carter and his family, Col. Goodwin and his wife, a family by the name of Williamson, and Sir Henry Jonson and his wife. All were apparently close friends of Lady Leith’s and none were familiar to me, which was a relief. There was no chance of being recognized by any of them.

Had my brother known them? I wished there was some way I could ask without drawing undue attention to myself. Why would a servant ask such a personal question?

My pace on my return to the drawing room was much slower. The dowager had an impossible disposition. In a way, she put me in mind of Mrs. Burnham, with her selfish viewpoint. However, where my first employer had been little inclined to put forth effort for anything, Anne Leith seemed determined to punish and torment everyone around her.

It wouldn’t be easy to stay ahead of her and protect Lady Leith from the worst of the dowager’s venom. If only there was a way to send an anonymous message to Sir Horace and bring him back to look after his wife, as well as bring any documents that would prove his innocence or guilt.

Resisting the urge to laugh, I shook my head. “I may as well wish for my brother’s murderer to present himself to me with his compliments.”

When I arrived back at the drawing room, there was a definite chill in the atmosphere. Lady Leith was seated at the pianoforte, her fingers striking the ivory keys harder than necessary. I couldn’t recognize the melody she played no doubt because the temp was incredibly fast.

“You there, hand me that list,” Lady Anne demanded, holding

her hand out. She was seated on the opposite side of the room, the corners of her mouth turned down in obvious disapproval. "Do not keep me waiting any longer."

Before I took a single step, I focused on my employer in as deliberate a manner as possible. After all, the dowager was not the one in charge at Clarendon. Whatever her position may have been, I was not about to bow to her wishes now.

"I will not repeat myself, Nelson!"

"Lady Leith?" I said quietly.

With a start, Lady Leith paused and turned. Her gaze flicked between me and her mother-in-law and her lips quirked with a slight smile. She gave a slight nod, and only then did I carry the list to Lady Anne, who hadn't missed the exchange.

"I only hope you did not invite any of those encroaching mushrooms your uncle spent so much time with," Lady Anne said, snatching the page from my hand. She brought up a delicate gold lorgnette and peered through it.

Lady Leith rose from the pianoforte with undue force. "I'm sure each family on my list is above any reproach."

"Hmm." The dowager's lips turned downward as she studied the names. She let the list fall to her lap. "We absolutely must invite the Reynolds. Mary Reynolds is one of my dearest friends, and I know they are also acquainted with the Carters. We have the space here at Clarendon, and what would be the point if we do not fill every bedroom?"

"The Reynolds? I did not think they intended on doing much visiting this summer."

"They would not refuse an invitation from me. Either you will write out an invite or I will do so myself." There did not seem to be any hint of doubt that Lady Leith would obey her mother-in-law's demand. "Am I not allowed one friend in this foolish venture?"

"I need nothing more, Nelson. Thank you," Lady Leith said to me, giving no indication whether she *would* obey the dowager's decree or not.

I gave a respectful curtsy and retreated from the room. As I pulled the door closed, I heard Lady Anne say, "Honestly, girl, why must you be so unreasonable? You ought to have dismissed that creature long ago. She is impudent and...."

Breathing out, I stepped away. I didn't need to hear her opinion of me. To be honest, I'd expected the dowager to put up more a

fight to get what she wanted. Inviting one more family was harmless enough, though there was always the possibility they would not get on with the other invited guests. What was she really planning?

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it.”



THOUGH I GAVE IT MY best effort, my volume of Shakespeare's sonnets failed to hold my attention when I returned to it. My mind kept trying to devise ways Lady Leith and I would be able to outsmart the dowager. I was still without a solid plan when I was summoned to the dressing room once more.

Lady Leith's expression was one of distraction and annoyance as she undressed for the night. "I suppose it could have been worse," she said as I brushed out her long brown hair. "The Reynolds' can be agreeable enough, though Mrs. Reynolds and her daughter could test the patience of any sensible person. We ought to have room if we put the Carter girls in a room together and then have the Williamson girls share another room."

"I have the feeling the only objection the young ladies will have is that there are no young men as guests."

"I suppose you're right, but I am in no mood to play matchmaker," Lady Leith said with a slight smile. "Although if I had planned it right, it would have eliminated the need for me to entertain everyone every minute of the day. I could have let them all go off to become better acquainted."

"No, you would have had to *watch* them every minute of the day, and just think of how tedious that would have been!" I set down the brush and began to separate her hair into sections. "No doubt the dowager would blame you for any indiscretion the young ladies were unfortunate enough to allow."

"As she will blame me for anything, I can well believe it." Lady Leith glanced at my reflection in the mirror, a slight frown creasing her forehead. "I suppose I shall be glad to have avoided that particular complaint, then. We'll play the usual games and have the neighbours over for a picnic."

"Not to mention the neighbours joining you for dinner. Also, your guests will expect a ball to end the visit, which will be something to look forward to. The dowager could not object to it at all."

The frown on my employer's face deepened. "Did one of your previous employers host summer parties then? You seem so knowledgeable about the matter."

Saying too much in an effort to be useful was my biggest failing. "You might say that," I said vaguely, hoping it would be enough.

The summer before I went to London for the season, I'd gone with my mother to several house parties. Our hostesses had worked tirelessly to make sure everyone was occupied and that no couple was ever left alone. I had enjoyed watching the courting couples try to sneak out of sight of the chaperones, guessing which romance would last.

"Well, I'm sure it will be interesting, if nothing else," Lady Leith said, rubbing her temple. "I hate to think what my husband will say if he comes in the middle of it all."

I held back a sigh of relief that she had taken my words at face value. I tied off her braid with a narrow ribbon and kept my gaze so she wouldn't see my gratification at the change of subject. "I promise I shall keep constant watch so that you can greet him first and then explain that it was his mother's idea."

This time, the lady let out a light laugh and stood up. "What have I to worry about, then? Thank you, Nelson. Get some rest while you can. I have no doubt the next few weeks are going to be busy ones. Good night."

"Good night, my lady," I said as she went through the connecting door to her bedroom.

With a shake of my head, I began to set the room to rights. When I returned into my bed, tired from my work, I didn't even give Shakespeare a glance.

Since I'd deciphered one note, I'd hoped to find the poem that was key to the other message. A headache had begun to pound in my temples, though, so I resolved to continue my search when I could focus.

I sank onto my bed and then fell onto my back. "What am I doing?" I asked, staring up at the ceiling.

The more I helped Lady Leith, the more I wished I could speak to her as myself, her equal. As I had realized earlier, it would be that much harder to take action if it did turn out that her husband had a part in selling information to France. Hurting her when she'd been so miserable would give me pause.

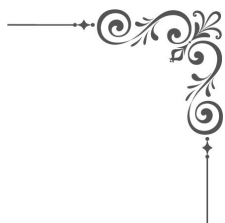
"She deserves to know the truth," I whispered. "If I were in her

shoes, I would want to know the truth however hurtful it might be.” After all, the truth about my brother’s death had been painful but knowing was better than ignorance.

But Lady Leith was not me, and she clearly adored on her absent husband.

With an effort, I sat and then stood up to get ready for bed. The sooner I thought of a way to get into Sir Horace’s office, the sooner I could make progress to know whether he was the man I sought.

And if he was...well, I would be left to follow the mindset that had plagued me for weeks. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”



Chapter Five

Over the course of the next two days, I took every free moment to go down to the office. Every time, though, there was something that kept me from even touching the door. Once it was a maid, scurrying to get her work done. Another time it was the steward, staring at me with suspicion in his eyes.

If I had some idea of the routine he kept, it would be easier to get around him. Surely he must inspect the tenant farms or be required to go out to solve problems. What steward remained exclusively in an office?

At the same time, the dowager made her presence felt in every corner of the house. She had demands for activities and games for the house party. To appease her, footmen were sent to the attics every few hours on a search for equipment for said games. Equipment which then needed to be taken out to be dusted and cleaned.

Acceptances began to arrive soon after. It seemed an invitation to Clarendon was not one people would refuse, no matter how sudden it arrived. All bedrooms would be taken, and the neighbours who would join the party during the day had also sent word that they would be delighted to attend.

Mrs. Horner set the maids to cleaning every inch of the house. At any hour, I would come across someone hard at work in the hallway or carrying clean linen to a bedroom. This made it impossible to search out information in Sir Horace's office, even when I knew Mr. Stone had been called out.

The dowager decided that the occasion demanded a new gown, while Lady Leith instructed me to simply make over several of the gowns already in her wardrobe. I expected I would be able to think while I sat with needle and thread in my hand, but such was not the case.

Lady Leith had said she would rely on my discretion to alter the gowns. There is a great difference between removing an abundance of lace and bows to being in charge of altering a gown's appearance, thus my preoccupation.

In that time, I composed my thoughts enough to write back to Aunt Beth. I thanked her for warning me about Uncle Frederick's return, made no mention of his plan to find me a husband among his circle of friends, and told her that Clarendon House reminded me of home. Neutral enough not to alarm her and close enough to the truth that I did not feel bad writing it.

My half day arrived, and as soon as Lady Leith dismissed me, I went straight to the hallway containing Sir Horace's office. No one was in sight as I approached the door. I held my breath and my heart beat faster as I reached my hand for the doorknob.

It refused to budge.

"Odd," I said with a frown. Why was the door locked? Didn't the steward go in and out every day? Wouldn't it have been simpler to leave the door unlocked? Was something important kept inside?

Frustrated that I had made no progress, I slipped down the back staircase and then went out into the sun. A summer breeze lightly brushed my face and I breathed in the scent of grass and blooming flowers.

With nothing and no one to stop me, I set out for the hedge maze. At least there was a puzzle I could look into that didn't have some importance attached to it.

I let my fingers trail along the branches of the thick bushes as I walked around it. It had obviously been there for some time as the hedge was over my head. Once someone entered, they would not be able to look over the bushes to the centre as a way to cheat the maze. There was no gardener in sight, so I couldn't ask whether there was a map of the maze or not. While I could have entered and found my way by trial and error, I decided to prowl around the outside to get an idea of how big it was.

I'd been walking for at least ten minutes when I saw a tall, slender man. It took a moment for me to recognize young Mr. Leith.

He wore no jacket over his white shirt sleeves, and it didn't appear that he had a cravat tied around his neck. There was a sketchbook in his hand, hinting at his Sunday afternoon's occupation.

He glanced in my direction and his lips spread into a wide grin. Coming to a halt, he faced me and offered an exaggerated bow.

Naturally, I imitated him and sank into a deep curtsy, one fit for royalty. When I lifted my gaze, Mr. Leith had tucked his sketchbook under his arm and clapped his hands together. He appeared so happy, I wondered how often he was mocked or bullied because he was unable to hear.

"Mr. Leith," I said, moving forward. I held my hand out as though we were old friends. "I am delighted to see you today."

Mr. Leith's head tilted as he clasped my hand with his. For the briefest moment, his forehead creased with a puzzled frown. Of course. He didn't understand me and reading lips was a talent that took years to master.

How was I supposed to communicate with him? Did he know how to write and read?

As if he had the same idea, Mr. Leith pulled his hand from mine and brought his sketchbook out. He used his charcoal to write something and then he held the book up for me. *It is a lovely day, Miss Nelson.*

Wait. How did he know my name? Lady Leith had only said I was her maid when I was first introduced to him. Had one of the servants told him?

The charcoal pencil wobbled in front of me as Mr. Leith encouraged me to take it from him. It was something my brother would have done when he was impatient with my slowness. Forcing away the rush of sadness, I accepted the pencil, though I was uncertain what I would say in response.

It is, Mr. Leith. I have been contemplating how I could solve the maze.

His lips spread in a grin as he read my words. *And yet you have not stepped through the entrance,* he wrote in answer. His brown eyes had a twinkle of amusement in them. *Sometimes one must press forward to solve a problem.*

How true that was! Though he offered the pencil to me once more, the snap of a twig behind me made me spin around. Miss Webber, the woman who looked after Mr. Leith's needs, walked towards me. There was a pinched expression on her face.

“Oh, Nelson,” she said, disapproval in her voice. “I am surprised to find Mr. Leith with you.”

“His path and mine intersected here,” I said, resisting the urge to scowl at her. Her words implied this was a planned meeting, and nothing could be further from the truth. “He and I were admiring the fine day.”

The furrow in her brow deepened. “Are you mocking me? That is not possible.”

“Indeed it is. Mr. Leith and I have been communicating with his sketchpad,” I said, puzzled about why she took offence. Realizing how rude it was to have my back to Mr. Leith when he could not know what I was saying, I turned so that he was on my right and Miss Webber on my left. The young man glanced between us. “Did you require him for something?”

“I find your tone impertinent, Nelson,” Miss Webber said, ignoring my question. Nelson? Our roles made us equals, so there should have been a polite ‘Miss’. “Do you expect to improve your lot in life by attaching yourself to Mr. Simon?”

It took all of my self-control not to laugh out loud. That was her suspicion? “Nothing could be further from the truth, Miss Webber, I do assure you,” I said with a smile.

“Your amusement is unseemly. I just caught you lingering with him unchaperoned as though you wished to be caught out! It is obvious what your intentions are, so there is no need for such prevarication.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. I’d heard many ridiculous things since I became a maid, and this could well be the most unbelievable. “Your imagination runs wild, but we are being rude. Mr. Leith has been left in the dark about this conversation. Allow me to enlighten him so he may share in this entertaining idea.”

“Enough!” Miss Webber exclaimed, her tone rising with her anger. “I shall report this to the dowager, mark my words. You will be gone by morning!”

Again, someone who saw the dowager as the highest authority on the estate. “I shall inform Lady Leith and abide by her decision.”

She drew herself up, her eyes narrowed in a glare. “You think that naive girl will save you?”

“Webby?” Mr. Leith spoke up, his voice that strange mixture of high pitched and off-key that I’d heard in my youth. “What is

wrong?”

With a shake of her head, Miss Webber moved around me and approached the man. She gestured for him to follow her. “Come along, Simon.” Her fingers wrapped around his thin bicep, and she tugged. “It’s time for tea.”

For a brief moment, Mr. Leith resisted her urgings, a stubborn set to his mouth. He jerked out of her grasp and faced me to offer one last bow. It lacked the merriment he’d shown earlier. “Good day, Miss Nelson.”

Sad to be unable to continue our conversation, I bobbed a curtsy. “Good day, Mr. Leith.” I watched him walk away from the maze. Miss Webber glanced over her shoulder once to, I assume, ensure I was not following them.

Breathing out a sigh, I continued on my exploration of the outer edge of the maze. What had been said to Miss Webber for her to take such a dislike of me? I did not expect to be universally liked, such would have been a foolish idea, but both she and Mr. Stone were suspicious of me for seemingly no reason.

Or was the reason that I was Lady Leith’s employee and out of their control?

“Well, I suppose I should be glad she does not live in the house,” I said aloud. “Between her and Miss Hansen I would be faced with more than I could handle.”



LADY LEITH APPEARED distracted when she came into the dressing room. I helped her into a lovely blue evening gown, waiting for her to initiate a conversation. It was only once she was seated and I had begun to arrange her hair that she spoke.

“The dowager is under the impression that you wish to entrap my brother, Simon, in marriage.”

Good heavens, Miss Webber hadn’t wasted any time in causing mischief! “Is that so? Did the dowager mention who had told her such a story?” I asked, choosing my words with care. How much had the story been twisted?

For a brief moment, Lady Leith’s forehead creased with a frown. “Not that I recall. Does that have some bearing on the situation?”

“I believe it does. You see, I spent my free time on a walk this afternoon,” I explained as I kept my eyes on the woman’s hair.

“When I reached the maze, I encountered Mr. Leith, who I believe

had been sketching there. We exchanged pleasantries, but our conversation went no further than that due to Miss Webber's arrival."

"You exchanged pleasantries with Simon?" the lady repeated with no little surprise. "What do you mean by that?"

"With the help of his sketchpad, of course, my lady. He wrote his thoughts and I did the same. As I said, Miss Webber came across us, and expressed her offense at the situation. I was amused, naturally, which only served to outrage her further. She accused me of being impertinent, and said she would tell the dowager and that I would be gone by morning."

The woman heaved a sigh. "I see." She paused before she continued, "Miss Webber can be protective of Simon at times. I suppose she thought she was doing the right thing."

"I'm sorry if my actions have brought you more distress," I said, genuinely sorry to have been the cause of added strife. "I'd wondered what could have caused Miss Webber to take me in dislike, but if she has been the sole caretaker for Mr. Leith all these years, I understand she would be hesitant to allow others near him."

"It was good of you to show an interest in Simon. He does not have any friends due to his...well, his lack of hearing. He is so often in his own company, save for Miss Webber, of course."

"He never had a tutor or some kind of instructor?"

She shook her head, hampering my efforts to secure her curls with hairpins. "The dowager deemed it unnecessary, so Miss Webber, who was a nursemaid, has been the only one to look after Simon all this time."

"Well, he seems to be a charming young gentleman."

In the mirror, I saw Lady Leith narrow her eyes at me. "Oh?"

"I have no intention of trying to trap Mr. Leith in marriage," I said, holding back a sigh of my own. "He was polite, much like any other young gentleman I've had occasion to meet."

"I would not be surprised if you had considered the idea now that Miss Webber has put it into your mind," she said, her tone serious. "After all, such a marriage would elevate you from a life of service."

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing at that. "True," I said in as grave a tone as I could muster. "Only think of how much the dowager would react. Why, she may even come to appreciate you as a daughter if I were the only other candidate."

Lady Leith let out a laugh and the seriousness in her face eased a bit. "Or, more likely, she will blame the downfall of the family reputation on me. After all, you are my maid and I am the one who brought you into the house."

"Well, then, since it would serve to make the situation worse, I suppose I shall have to abandon my plan to improve myself."

The woman sighed again and shook her head, once again hindering my efforts. "I suppose I ought to have known someone was causing mischief. Someone is *always* causing mischief in this house."

"You cannot mean that the servants cause mischief." After my attempt at subtle questioning of the maid some days earlier, I had been under the impression that the loyalty of the house was in Lady Leith's favour.

"There are a few who do so. Mr. Stone is reluctant to discuss the state of the estate with me, but makes an almost daily report to the dowager," Lady Leith confessed in a rush. "One of the footmen will announce visitors to her first before I am made aware that anyone has arrived, and I am sure one of the maids puts the worst of the linen on my bed."

She heaved a sigh and shook her head before she continued, "I ought not to complain. After all, I cannot prove any of my suspicions."

Though I know I ought to keep out of it, I asked, "Is the footman from one of the families who have served on Clarendon Estate for a hundred years?"

Pausing, Lady Leith frowned. "No," she said slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, what objection could Sir Horace have if you choose to dismiss the footman?"

Twisting around, she stared at me. "What are you talking about?"

"You said before that you did not feel you could dismiss someone who had lived on Clarendon all their life and their family were loyal servants. At the same time, as the mistress of the house, you have the right to choose who serves here?" I reasoned. "If, as you suspect, this footman is sowing trouble and being deliberately disrespectful, you would be well rid of him."

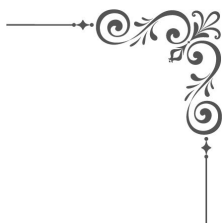
"You mean for me to take a stand as the mistress of the house? What do you imagine I would accomplish in making such a

decision?”

“Respect from those who remain,” I said, astonished that she was so resistant to the idea. “Naturally, you would not want to dismiss Mr. Stone, as he does so much for your husband. And as Miss Webber has been with the family for a number of years, it might be best to discuss a change when Sir Horace returns. There is no proof of the maid’s mistake, not unless Mrs. Horner makes an inspection of the linen herself. The footman’s disrespect, however, is blatant and should not be ignored.”

It had to be the most I’d said to her without pause. With her hair perfectly arranged and pinned into place, I stepped back. Without even checking her appearance in the mirror, Lady Leith rose and faced me. “I will consider it, but I don’t think this is the time for me to be making changes to the household. That will be all, Nelson.”

The dismissal was obvious. Pursing my lips to keep from trying to argue the point, I bobbed a curtsy. Lady Leith left the room without another word.



Chapter Six

Dressing myself in the morning was a task I had become proficient at in the last few months. Though I had been without a personal maid since the death of my parents, my great-aunt had been good enough to allow her maid, Carter, to assist me. In the Burnham household, one of the other maids had assisted me. When I'd joined the Dunbar house in Bath, however, I'd had to learn how to tie my stays on my own.

After I secured my hair in a low chignon, I walked to the small window and looked out. A low fog still clung to the grass, and the sun was just peeking over the horizon. There was a peacefulness in the morning that I appreciated as I grew accustomed to rising early in the morning.

Taking a deep breath, I turned away and walked out of my room. It was easier to simply begin my work than to think about how much I had to do.

When I entered the kitchen for Lady Leith's tray, I found the usual chaos to be more hectic than any other day. Cook, a rail thin woman of uncertain age, barely glanced at me as she said, "On the table, Miss Nelson. And I trust her ladyship will not find fault in it."

"Lady Leith has never found fault with her tea and toast," I felt obliged to say. I'd never seen lady Leith send back an untouched tray, and certainly she had never complained about what the cook made. Why the sudden fear that she would?

"And she's never ordered Mr. Stone to dismiss two maids and a footman either," Mrs. Horner said as she rushed into the room. "It

was good of her to ensure they received their full quarter wages, but to have them depart immediately has left us shorthanded.”

Fanny, the maid I saw the most of, brushed past me. “Shorthanded with a party approaching,” she said boldly. “I don’t understand why my lady would do such a thing to us.”

Lady Leith had taken my advice after all? When she had insisted that it was not the time to make drastic changes to the household. “No reason was given for the dismissals?” I asked, astonished.

“Her ladyship doesn’t need to give a reason. She is the mistress of this house,” Mrs. Horner said, her tone sharp. Her eyes held a warning that I didn’t understand. “What she did say informed me that some of the servants had become lax in their duties.”

“One thing is for sure, the dowager is going to be a dragon about it,” Cook commented, banging her spoon against the rim of a pot. “If she doesn’t bring down the roof when she finds out, I will eat my spoon.”

“I thought Mr. Stone was going to be the one to put up a fuss,” Fanny spoke up. “He was in a fury last night.”

“Fanny Kelly, that’s enough out of you!” Mrs. Horner said, her tone scolding. “You’re not paid to give an opinion, so you’d best keep it to yourself.”

Bowing my head to hide my conflicted feelings, I carried the tray out of the busy kitchen. I was both pleased and confused. What had made Lady Leith change her mind so suddenly? When I assisted her right before bed, she’d said nothing and I hadn’t dared approach the subject again.

She was already sitting up in her bed when I entered the bedchamber. “We have three days before our guests begin to arrive,” she said without any preamble. “I suppose Mrs. Horner will not thank me for disrupting the household as I have done.”

“She had nothing untoward to say while I was in her presence,” I said, setting her tray down on her lap. I walked to the windows and drew the curtains open. “I have every confidence in her ability to organize the household.”

Lady Leith made a sound that sounded suspiciously like an unladylike snort. “Well, she wouldn’t say anything in front of you, would she.”

Suppressing the urge to laugh, I turned and gave a nod. “No, she wouldn’t, my lady. I will leave you to your chocolate.”

To my surprise, she was frowning down at her tray. “Nelson,

take this away. I have no appetite this morning.”

“Surely, you ought to at least eat the toast,” I said, hurrying forward. I took in her pale face and grabbed the tray from her lap. “On the other hand, you know what’s best for yourself. I’ll set this to the side in case you change your mind.”

Cook would be offended and someone would have to appease her. A problem I set aside as not being one of my responsibilities.

“Later today, I have to formalize the planned activities for the party. The dowager has brought out too many games,” Lady Leith said, her voice unsteady. I saw her swallow hard. “Leave me for now, Nelson.”

“Of course, my lady.” Obediently, I set her tray on a small table against the wall and left the room, keeping my concerns to myself.

More than ever I was sure of the answer to Lady Leith’s sudden queasiness. Was she with child? If I, who had never been in such a state, suspected such a thing, surely, she who had wished for a child so long would have the same suspicion.

Would the stress and anxiety of hosting a party be detrimental to her health? I hoped that she would be able to eat a bit of the toast on her tray.

Trying to shake off my worry, I went to where my own breakfast was waiting for me in the housekeeper’s room. As I was eating my eggs and ham, Mrs. Horner entered. “You have another letter, Miss Nelson,” she said, holding out the missive. “You must have a devoted friend in London. This must be the second letter this week.”

Her interest made me smile despite my unease. “Thank you, Mrs. Horner,” I said as I took the letter from her. A glance showed that the handwriting was Aunt Beth’s, and I guessed it was thick because it contained all of the correspondence that had arrived for me in my absence. “This is actually from my great-aunt.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had any family alive. You’ve never mentioned them before.”

“I don’t have much family left. My great-aunt does love to keep me apprised of all the news she hears.”

Her curiosity satisfied, Mrs. Horner went on her way. Breathing a sigh of relief, I unsealed the letter. Though she had addressed the letter, there was no note from Aunt Beth. Instead, as I had suspected, there were other letters. Of the three, only one was written in a hand I recognized. That one I set aside to read last.

The first was a kind note from Miss Grace Anderson, who had

been engaged to my brother. She expressed her gratitude for my last letter and hoped that she would be able to meet me when she came to town after her marriage to Mr. Melbourne. There was something she wished to give me.

I couldn't help but smile at the news she was to marry. When I'd left Bath, all I'd known was that Mr. Melbourne was intent on waiting until Miss Anderson was ready to accept him. In fact, he had declared he would wait until he was old and grey if that was what it took to win her hand.

Knowing the woman who had intended on marrying my brother had decided to find some happiness warmed my heart. She deserved to have a secure, contented future, and if Mr. Melbourne was the man I thought he was, she would have it.

A glance at the clock showed I still had some time before Lady Leith would expect me to be in the dressing room. I picked up the second letter and unfolded it. This one was from one Mrs. Gerard Landon.

"My dear Miss Sinclair,

"I hope that this letter finds you well. It has been far too long since I last spent a summer at your father's estate. Of course I can only blame myself for not attempting to keep in contact. You may not even recall the little, wild-haired girl who wanted to spend every moment with you...

Tears welled up in my eyes as Eugenia Landon, née Burnham, informed me of her marriage to Mr. Landon. She described the little estate outside of London she now called home. The letter ended with the hope that I would write back so she would know how and where I was.

My pleasure at hearing such good news dimmed as my gaze landed on the final note that had been contained in the packet. It was from Henry Bladen. Aunt Beth's maid, Carter, must have included the message when my aunt was not looking. I couldn't blame her. She couldn't know that I had told Mr. Bladen not to contact me anymore.

Since I'd made myself clear on that point when last we met, what more did he think he had to tell me?

Before I could bring myself to break the seal, I checked the time again. With relief, I saw that it was time for me to return to Lady Leith. Whatever Henry Bladen thought was so important could wait.



“BEFORE I FORGET, WE will have to make sure to have the materials for silhouettes on hand. It will be a fun pastime in the evenings.”

“Of course.” I made a note on the side of my list. Silhouettes was actually an entertainment I’d never tried my hand at, although my mother had kept one on her desk that she had made of my father. Whatever happened to that silhouette? Did my uncle have it?

No, why would he have kept his brother-in-law’s image? Had it been thrown out? Lost to time and an indifferent heir?

“Celia Leith!” The dowager swept into the room, rage glittering in her pale eyes. “What have you done?”

“I don’t know what you mean, ma’am” Lady Leith said calmly. She sent a glance at me. “Nelson, Mrs. Emerson on the edge of the estate is unwell. When you go down to the kitchen, ask Cook to put together a basket of food and have it ready for me to take.”

I’d expected her to send me off so that she could argue with the dowager without an audience. Uneasy, I scrambled to make a note of the request. Who had brought her the news about this Mrs. Emerson?

“Do not ignore me, Celia,” the dowager warned, striding across the room. “You have dismissed several members of the household. Don’t try to deny it! I have had it all from Hanson and Mr. Stone!”

“I see no reason to deny it.” Lady Leith maintained her calm demeanour. “I was not satisfied with their work, and Horace gave me leave to make any alterations to the house and servants that I found necessary. So, they were paid for the time they were head and instructed to leave.”

The dowager’s hands were balled in fists. “Perhaps you do not understand the consideration we must give the families who live on the estate.”

“I understand it very well, as you have been at pains to tell me how things are run at Clarendon. The maids and the footman I dismissed did not come from the estate families. I really do not understand what you are so alarmed about,” Lady Leith said, her tone becoming sharp. “Their work was mediocre at best.”

For a moment, the older woman stared at her. Then, her gaze swung to me. “Do you mean to tell me you intend to keep that creature here?” She raised her hand and pointed one finger accusingly at me. “After the information I learned about her? Does your hypocrisy know no bounds?”

“Nelson’s service has been exceptional.” Lady Leith stood up to face her mother-in-law. “I see no reason to deprive myself of her assistance over baseless rumours.”

“Baseless rumours? You would be willing to have a maid as your future sister?”

“Your fear that Nelson will entrap Simon into marriage is completely absurd, as I have already said. I see no reason for us to discuss it anymore. Nor do I see a reason to repeat or give credence to malicious gossip.”

With a scowl, the dowager shook her head. “You are unreasonable. When Horace returns—”

“When my husband returns, you can be sure I intend on informing him of everything you have said to me.” Lady Leith raised her chin, her blue eyes glinting with determination. “Now. I am busy with planning. Did you have an activity you wished for at the party?”

“What care have I for a party when I am about to see my family’s name and reputation dragged into the mud?”

“What a shame as you were so insistent about the party before,” Lady Leith said as she picked up the small pile of acceptances. “In a matter of days, we will have a houseful of guests and I’m sure you wouldn’t want to give them any hint of gossip to take away with them.”

For a moment, I was certain the dowager was trembling with rage. “If you were truly concerned about gossip and scandal, you would send that impertinent adventuress away!”

“I think this conversation has exhausted itself,” my employer said, lifting her pen. “If I do not take tea with you, I will see you at dinner.”

The dismissal was obvious. With a slight gasp, the dowager took a step back. She then spun around and left the sitting room. I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “My feelings exactly, Nelson,” Lady Leith said, her expression drawn and tired.

“If it would make things easier for you, I am willing to leave,” I said softly. Lady Leith did not need this stress.

“Easier? The dowager would win once again and that is the last thing I want to happen.” Lady Leith shook her head. “She may have more experience in getting her way but she will find that I am more determined.”

Her right hand slipped down to her stomach. The intimate

gesture confirmed my suspicions. "You're with child, aren't you?" I said before I could stop myself.

She lifted her gaze quickly and her cheeks flushed bright red. "I have my suspicions," she said, her tone quiet. "The signs are there, but I would prefer to wait until I am sure before anyone else knows. My husband should be the first to know."

Instead it was her maid. I cleared my throat and glanced at my notes. "Will there be anything else, my lady?"

"Not at the moment. Don't forget to speak to Cook about the basket. I intend to walk to the Emerson cottage in an hour's time."

"I will be ready."

Lady Leith shook her head. "I will not need your company. Mr. Stone will be accompanying me as there seems to be a complaint about the cottage roof."

Mr. Stone was going to be away from the office. If I could find a key in that time, I could get in and make my search. "Of course, my lady." It took all of my self-control to keep my eagerness from showing as I retreated from the room.

Now was my chance.



AS QUICK AS I COULD, I conveyed Lady Leith's wishes to the Cook and then Mrs. Horner. At the right time, I had a bonnet and spencer ready for my employer's walk. She thanked me, took the basket of food, and started for the office where Mr. Stone was at work. On a whim, I followed her down, taking care to stay far enough back that Lady Leith did not take notice of me.

"Mr. Stone, come. It's time for us to go see the Emersons," she announced as she stood in the open doorway. "Surely you did not forget our appointment this afternoon?"

"Lady Leith, I'm afraid I have a great deal to do," I heard Mr. Stone respond. "There are several positions in need of filling in the household, as you must be aware. I will consult my schedule and let you know what time would be convenient."

"Right now is convenient for *me*, Mr. Stone," Lady Leith said, her tone reproving. "With a party of guests about to arrive, it will be some time before I am free to visit the Emersons. This is a matter that must be addressed sooner rather than later as you yourself said in your report."

There was a pause. "Are you asking me to leave my work?" the

steward finally asked. His tone was one of resentment.

“Indeed not. I am asking you to perform an aspect of your work that must be addressed. However, if you feel it is an inconvenience, I shall see the Emersons on my own. I will be sure to tell them all complaints shall be addressed to their satisfaction.”

Taking a step back, Lady Leith moved to do as she said. The sound of a book being slammed shut could be heard in the office. A moment later, Mr. Stone came rushing out, his jacket in hand. “A moment, Lady Leith,” he said, pulling the door shut behind him.

Lady Leith continued on as though she hadn’t heard him. With a sharp curse, Mr. Stone let go of the door handle and rushed away from the office door. He went in the opposite direction of where I stood and vanished around the corner in pursuit of her ladyship.

I couldn’t help but smile at Lady Leith’s manoeuvring of the situation. Was it the suspected child who inspired her to take charge of her household? Whatever the reason, I would not question it. She deserved to make her home how she desired.

In any event, there was one thing Mr. Stone had failed to do when he left the office. The door remained unlocked.

It opened with ease and I glanced around once before I stepped in. Eager to complete my task as soon as possible, I went straight to the desk. Papers were stacked in organized piles. The inkwell was still open and a pen was resting by it, though whatever Mr. Stone had been writing was out of sight.

Breathing out, I took a seat at the desk and began to flip through the papers. It was unlikely that anything incriminating would be left in plain sight, but I had to check to be sure. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary and it only took me a few minutes to glance at each page. None of the handwriting on the papers looked familiar and nothing seemed suspiciously worded.

Next, I searched through the drawers of the desk, which took less time than the correspondence had. “Nothing,” I said with a sigh as I sat back.

Either Sir Horace was clever enough not to keep incriminating notes at his home or he was not at all guilty of spying against the country.

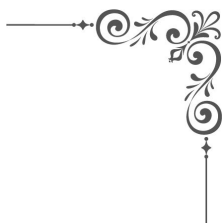
As I went to push the last drawer closed, I heard a slight click from somewhere in the desk. Puzzled, I bent down and examined the underside of the piece of furniture. The shadows made it difficult to see and I ran my hand along the surface of the wood. My

fingers found a small latch.

“What is this?” Slipping out of the chair, I went onto my hands and knees to climb under the desk. I pulled the latch and watched a small door swing open. Reaching into the small space, I pulled out a small handful of papers. “Now, why does Sir Horace have this hidden away?”

The first paper was an unsigned letter. It was a brief note to inform Sir Horace of Jonathan Sinclair’s death. Why had he kept it for so many years? And why did he feel it necessary to hide it?

Unsettled, I set it aside and unfolded the next piece of paper. My breath caught in my throat as I took in the series of numbers that filled the paper. It looked exactly as the ones that had been found in Jonathan’s possession!



Chapter Seven

“I was right,” I breathed out, leaning against the desk. I stared at the paper in no little shock. Of all the things I had imagined I might find, this was not one of them. “Coming here wasn’t a waste of time. Sir Henry knows *something*.”

But did he know *that something*, whatever it was, because he had found the note himself? Did he have the paper because he’d been working with my brother? Or was Sir Horace one of the enemies?

Crawling out from under the desk, I searched for a clean sheet of paper. As quickly as I could, I copied the numbers so that I could add it to the others for further study. Would the numbers correspond to another Shakespearean sonnet as I had used to solve the cipher before or was another book the key?

The other papers that had been beneath the cipher took several minutes to read. Most were simply notes containing only a handful of words: “*No proof.*” “*It’s been handled.*” “*Further investigation required. No action can be taken without serious repercussions.*”

“*Be careful.*”

They were not notes one would receive in the daily running of an estate. The writing was vaguely familiar, though I did not take the time to consider why that might be.

A glance at the clock showed that I’d been in the room for over half an hour. While I knew Lady Leith and Mr. Stone would be gone for some time, I didn’t want to risk it any longer. I’d learned what I needed from the room.

Back under the desk I went to return the papers as I had found

them. When I straightened back up, I slipped my copy of the numbered page into my pocket. I walked to the door and opened it just enough to peek out.

No one was in sight in the hallway. I slipped out and closed the door firmly behind me. Giddy with excitement, I started down the hallway. There was work still to be done, such that did not involve sneaking around the house.

But, first, I would find a hiding place for my new clue.



“MISS NELSON, LADY LEITH has requested you in her sitting room.”

Surprised by the maid’s words, I lifted my gaze from the hem I was repairing. The young woman was staring intensely at me from the doorway of the dressing room. “Of course. Thank you, Fanny,” I said, puzzled by her behaviour. “I’ll go right down.”

I hadn’t seen Lady Leith since she had returned from her walk and I’d taken charge of her bonnet and spencer. She’d seemed distracted and had left me immediately. It had only been an hour since then.

When I entered the sitting room, Lady Leith was in front of the window. For several moments, she kept her back to me, though she must have heard me. My stomach twisted as I waited. She’d never behaved like this before, not even when I’d been accused of pursuing her brother-in-law.

What had happened?

“Who are you?” Lady Leith faced me and her tone was as hard as the expression in her eyes. “You are not the dowager’s spy because even she could not put on such a convincing performance of disliking you. So whose servant are you and what did you hope to accomplish in coming here? No more lies, Nelson.”

Though she was not much older than I, Lady Leith’s demeanour was much as my mother’s had often been when she caught me in some mischief. Her jaw was set and her lips were pressed together.

“What do you mean, my lady?” I asked with no little caution. Why would she think I was a spy? Nevermind that I could be called that considering my actions.

“Come, Nelson,” Lady Leith said with a scowl. “I have suspected for some time that you are not what you claim to be. Your skill at the pianoforte betrayed you as having had a good education,

enough that a position as governess or companion would be open to you. Certainly, either option would be far preferable to the thankless position of a personal maid.”

Miss Burnham had been too occupied with her own romance to see such evidence and then Miss Dunbar had been too selfish. Of course I should have realized my current employer would be different. She was observant and took an interest in other people despite the worries she had.

“Mr. Stone has informed me someone was in the office while he and I were at the Emerson’s cottage.” Lady Leith moved to a chair and sat down. “He has already accounted for the other servants, and that leaves only you, Nelson. What were you trying to find in there? What are you doing in this house?”

What had I missed? I’d been so careful to leave things as I had found them. Taking a deep breath, I clasped my hands together. “May I sit down, my lady?” If we were going to have this conversation, it would be on equal ground.

She raised an eyebrow and then gave a curt nod. Relieved, I sat across from her. “Thank you. You are correct that I am not a lady’s maid. Not really. However, I assure you that no one sent me to cause mischief or to spy on you. My name isn’t Julie Nelson. I am Juliet Sinclair.”

Again, Lady Leith’s left eyebrow went up. “Juliet Sinclair? You don’t mean...Mr. Jonathan Sinclair’s sister?” Her tone was dubious, which was understandable.

As her husband had been a friend of Jonathan’s, I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised she’d known my brother as well. “The very same. As I have some respect for my family name, I have been using the name of ‘Nelson’ these past few months.”

Leaning forward, she narrowed her eyes. “I suppose there is something of Mr. Sinclair in your eyes. Very well. Let’s assume I believe you. What induced you to take part in such a pretence?”

From her tone, it was difficult to tell what she was really thinking. Her expression was also blank. How had she become so good at hiding her emotions?

“It wasn’t my idea, I assure you.” How much could I safely tell her? “You see, since the death of my parents, I have lived quietly with my great-aunt. However, earlier this year, I read an alarming comment in the Times. It made reference to a family whose name began with ‘S’, who were traitors to the country.”

Surprise flickered over Lady Leith's face. "And you assumed it was referring to your family?"

From the way she put it, it did seem rather a stretch. "That only brought it to my attention, but then I began to hear rumours brought to me by my great-aunt's servants. People whispered how fortunate it was that my father and brother were dead as it saved the trouble of a trial and execution."

"You cannot be serious!"

"I wish I were not. I knew my father had friends in London, so I decided to visit one of them in the hopes he would put a stop to the rumour. Of course, I could not visit the gentleman myself, but I could call upon his wife. Due to...well, a misunderstanding, she mistook me to be an applicant for the position of lady's maid."

Lady Leith sat back, her expression dazed. "How on earth did such a misunderstanding occur?"

"To be honest, I am not entirely sure. If I had to hazard a guess, one of the servants was negligent in their duties, however, the lady herself only exasperated the situation. Every time I attempted to correct her, I was interrupted. Indeed, I could not get a word in edgewise. Not without being inexcusably rude."

Her lips twitching as though she were fighting a smile, Lady Leith gave a nod. "That would be Mrs. Burnham, I presume?"

"You are acquainted with her?" I hadn't wanted to name Mrs. Burnham outright.

"Well enough to understand how you found yourself in such a situation." Lady Leith folded her hands in her lap. "However, Mrs. Burnham's mistake does not explain how it came to be that you *accepted* the position. Why did you do so?"

"When I received the letter offering me the position, I gave the matter a great deal of thought. Mrs. Burnham expressed a negative opinion of my family during what she believed was my interview with her. A lady's maid can have a close relationship with her employer. How better to convince Mrs. Burnham to approach her husband on behalf of what remained of the Sinclair family?"

I kept my gaze on Lady Leith, watching for any change in her expression. For the most part, she appeared to be puzzled. "Surely, once that was accomplished, you ought to have returned to the care of your family. Your great-aunt, you said? Months have passed, though. Why did you continue this pretence?"

"Because it was while I was in the Burnham house that I learned

my parents did not die in an accident as I had been told. Neither did my brother die from a fever as had been reported to me. They were murdered and no one had made a search to bring the man responsible to justice."

Lady Leith's hand flew to her lips. "That cannot be true."

"Mr. Burnham himself informed me in a letter, and while I was in Bath, I had it confirmed. At least, as far as my brother being murdered, that is."

"This is extraordinary!" she said, her shoulders relaxing. She shook her head. "I should not believe you, and yet, I find that I do."

That was a relief. "Thank you, my lady. Were someone to come to me with a similar tale, I am not certain I would think them at all sane. It is a strange tale."

"But why, if this pretence is to find this killer—which I must say I find to be ill-advised—are you here?"

I'd wondered when she would think to ask that. Heaving a sigh, I shook my head. "To escape Bath. I'm sure you remember the dowager's questions about Mr. Daniel Dunbar being attacked by a servant."

"She asked if you had attempted to kill him, though I'd heard some rumour that he'd attacked a...maid." Lady Leith straightened up, her eyes widening as she connected the facts together. "Are you telling me that was true? And you stabbed him?"

"He was drunk and would not listen to reason. I'd refused his attention countless times before he burst into my room the last night I was there..." I tried to keep my tone calm, but the memories were still unsettling. "I gave him every opportunity to leave me but in the end I had to defend myself."

"Of course, of course," Lady Leith said quickly. "I'd heard rumours of his—" She broke off with a shake of her head. "Suffice to say, I do not doubt a single word you say. Perhaps he will think better of such behaviour from now on."

A laugh bubbled up. "One can only hope." My amusement faded as quickly as it had come. "Please forgive me for taking advantage of your kindness. I meant no mischief in becoming your maid."

Except for my intention to discover whether her husband had a part in murdering my brother. How was I going to explain that detail? Could I hope that she wouldn't press me any further?

"What was it that made Mr. Stone believe someone had been in the office?" I asked, curious to know what I had missed.

Lady Leith shook her head. "He claimed he capped his ink before he left the room but found it open when he returned. And then, one of the maids, Fanny, said she saw you come from that area of the house."

As hard as I tried, I could not remember how I had left the ink after using it. "That...was not well done of me." After I copied the note, I had only been concerned with making sure the papers were in the right place.

"No, indeed," Lady Leith said with a slight smile. "For whatever reason, Mr. Stone has taken you in dislike, Nel....forgive me. Force of habit. Miss Sinclair. I believe he expects me to send you off before the sun sets."

Why was I not surprised? Was he aware of Sir Horace's activities? Now, that was a thought to consider later on.

"Now that I am aware of the situation, we cannot continue as before," Lady Leith said, much to my dismay. "I understand how you were drawn into your situation. In your position, I might have done the same. I shall have a carriage made ready to return you to your home."

Was my work done just as I found my first real clue? "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but my mission is not yet finished."

"How do you intend on continuing your search, then? Is there somewhere specific you intend to go?" Her eyes narrowed. "Or was there another reason you came to Clarendon? Did you find something? When you were in my husband's office, I mean."

Should I just tell her? She'd been understanding up to that point and, to be fair, she had taken longer to reach the question than I'd expected. "Yes," I said slowly. My hand went to my pocket and I pulled out the copy I'd made. "I found this."

She took it from me and she frowned. "How very odd." She sent a glance at me. "I assume this has some greater meaning to you?"

"I have a single clue, but I don't know what it means. Only that it is very important."

Interest sparked in Lady Leith's eyes as she leaned forward. "Perhaps you ought to share it with someone. I've often heard that a second opinion can be invaluable in such matters," she said, a note of eagerness in her voice.

The shift in her attitude was amusing. Of course, with only her mother-in-law for company, anything out of the ordinary to occupy her mind must have been more than welcome. "It would be easier

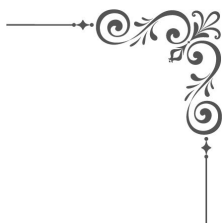
to show you, my lady, if you would allow me to go get the papers.”

Clasping her hands in her lap, Lady Leith gave a nod. “Of course.” She then sent a glance at the clock. “The dowager will be rising from her afternoon nap soon and I will have to go to her.”

“I won’t be but a few minutes.”

True to my word, it took all of five minutes to rush up to my room and pull my papers from where I’d hidden them. I stared down at my brother’s handwriting and then at the message I’d decoded.

Would another set of eyes see a clue I had missed?



Chapter Eight

In the hallways just outside my room, Miss Hanson stepped in front of me, her arms crossed. “Trouble, Miss Nelson?” she asked, her tone sweeter than she’d ever used with me before.

“Trouble? No. What would give you that impression, Miss Hanson?” I asked, hiding my hand against the skirt of my gown. If she saw the papers, she would be sure to ask about them and I did not have a ready excuse.

“You rushed from Lady Leith’s sitting room in such a hurry and now you come running back with equal speed,” she said, her eyes bright with curiosity. “Is her ladyship unwell? Perhaps I ought to go with you as I do have more experience with these things.”

What was she trying to imply? Or was she trying to bait me into giving something away? “What exactly are you referring to?”

“Why, I have no idea,” she said, her eyes widening. She lowered her voice and leaned forward. “The dowager has begun to suspect Lady Leith might be with child, but is too delicate to suggest it, of course.”

So she was trying to get information from me. Resisting the urge to scoff, I shook my head. “Lady Leith has not confided such momentous news to me,” I said, keeping my tone as sweet as hers. “I’m sure if such is the case, she is keeping the news for when her husband arrives and then the rest of the household shall be informed. Is that not the case with ‘these things?’”

Miss Hanson’s chin rose. “Well, what else is it that sends you rushing about for Lady Leith? Such haste is unseemly and causes all

to see it to wonder what has gone wrong.”

“That is between my lady and myself,” I said, stepping to go around her. “The dowager will be rising from her nap any minute now, will she not? Surely, she will require your assistance in some manner?”

The woman straightened her shoulders. “I do not need one such as you to remind me of what my duties are. Might I remind you that I have been at this longer than you have been alive?”

I couldn’t keep back a laugh. “I doubt the age difference between us is as extreme as that, Miss Hanson. You do yourself no favours making that sort of claim. Why, someone might expect you to retire in seclusion any day!”

She gasped and took a step back. For a moment, she stared at me, no sound coming from her throat. She then spun on her heel and strode away. Her hands clenched and unclenched as she marched along.

Breathing out a sigh, I hurried on my way to the sitting room. Lady Leith was only a few steps away from the door when I slipped in. “You were taking so long,” she said, her tone worried. “Did someone detain you?”

“I ran into the dowager’s maid, Miss Hanson,” I explained as I closed the door. “I believe she has been spying on me for her mistress. She thinks there is something afoot, but I think I’ve put her off for a while.”

“If there is one thing Hanson takes pleasure in, it is searching out any bit of gossip for the dowager.” Lady Leith shook her head. “Did she try to follow you here or did you manage to chase her off? I cannot count the times she has tried to push her way into something happening, claiming to have the experience to handle any problem.”

“She tried to convince me that since her years as a maid exceed my years alive, she would be better able to assist you,” I said, trying to hold back my amusement. “However, Miss Hanson took offense when I pointed out that using her age in such a way might not be beneficial to her.”

Lady Leith let out a giggle, but whether it was from genuine amusement or from nerves was a mystery. “She does not like to be reminded that she is long past the bloom of youth.” Her expression became troubled. “If she suspects we are conspiring, she will watch us even more than before.”

Which was exactly what I was afraid of. "With the arrival of your guests in a few days, I think she will soon be distracted."

"What clue do you have to show me?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Of course. I'm interested to see what you think of it. This was found among my brother's papers after he was killed and it was given to me while I was in Bath."

We both sat on the settee and I brought out the cipher. Her eyes widened as she took in the numbers. Colour drained from her cheeks. "Oh. I see now why you believe the paper you found in the office was relevant."

"Jonathan was working as an agent for the government when he was killed," I explained so that she would know the whole of it. "He was seeking a traitor in English society who was aiding Napoleon. I did not know this until recently. I can only assume that the cipher was an encoded message he intercepted."

"My husband may be in league with traitors?" Lady Leith's tone was one of horror.

"It could be that Sir Horace worked with Jonathan and has continued the work after my brother's death," I said to reassure her. "I didn't want to jump to any conclusions so you shouldn't either."

"Yes. Yes, of course, you're right." Lady Leith took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "And please don't think I have forgiven you for sneaking into my husband's office and going through his papers."

"The thought never crossed my mind." Though I'd begun to hope my little escapade would not be brought back up again. "I'm sorry to have trespassed on your goodwill."

She shook her head. "I do understand why you did what you have done and, as I also said, I may have done the same. When this is all over, however it ends, I do expect an apology." Her smile lessened the sting of her words.

"I will happily apologize if my suspicions are unfounded."

"Is there no other clue you've found? Anything that could give us a chance at solving this riddle."

"I'm afraid nothing definite," I said, shifting the papers so the second note was revealed. "This one I solved with a sonnet by Shakespeare, but so far I have not found the key to solving the other. The one that was solved was signed with only a letter: H. So there is that."

Understanding filled her expression as she sat back. “And that’s why you suspect my husband. Because his name begins with that letter.”

“Yes. My brother, as far as I knew, knew only a handful of people who had a name that began with that letter of the alphabet.” With a sigh, I shook my head. “However, it is likely I do not know every friend Jonathan had. It has been made clear I didn’t know him as I thought I did. He was involved in something I never would have imagined.”

Leaning back, Lady Leith tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. “I see. So there was more reason for you to come here than to escape the Dunbars.”

To my relief, there was no judgement in her tone. “It was providential you offered me the position. I thought if I could rule out one friend, it would be something. One step, however small, toward the truth.”

“I assume you have compared this unsolved note to other Shakespearean sonnets?”

“What few I know by memory. I have not found any success.”

“Well, if you are willing to accept help, I will apply myself to the task of deciphering it. I will find some reason to spend time in my husband’s office and search out what I can find. Between the pair of us, we ought to discover the truth behind this horrible conspiracy.”

We both stood up and faced each other. “Are you sure?” I couldn’t help but ask. “You may not like what you discover.”

“Miss Sinclair, you could have discovered that those rumours about your father were true. As it is, you have learned things about your family that would alarm any person.” Lady Leith raised her chin. “I can do no less. I am prepared to learn whatever truth about my husband there is for me to find.”

“Well then, in that case, you must call me Juliet. When we are away from all others, of course.”

Her face brightened with a genuine smile. “And you may call me Celia.”



WITH THE TIME FOR DINNER approaching, I left the unsolved ciphers with Celia. Despite my confession, it was still necessary for me to keep up the pretence of being her maid. Just when I had become accustomed to it, I’d just added a new level of difficulty. I

had to keep my new found familiarity from being noticed.

When Celia came into the dressing room, there was a moment of awkwardness. "This doesn't feel right," she said, her right hand rubbing her left arm. "You are my equal and should not be in the position of serving me."

"Well, as you said, there is no other way for me to remain here." I held up the dark green evening dress up for her perusal. "Is this what you were thinking of wearing?"

"Oh, yes," she said, barely giving the gown a glance. "Whatever you think appropriate."

"Did you see any pattern in the ciphers after I left you?" I asked as I laid the gown down. Stepping over, I began to undo the button of the walking dress.

"I did not," Celia said. She allowed me to pull the gown over her head as she continued talking. "I believe it may be necessary for us to make a thorough comparison to every Shakespearean sonnet until we find one that begins to make sense. I can think of no other plan."

"And if the cipher isn't based on any of Shakespeare's works, we're left with no leads at all," I added, laying the gown on the back of the dressing table chair. The thought has been in the back of my mind for several weeks. I just hadn't given voice to it, clinging to hope.

"True, but I think between us we'll be able to work it out," Lady Leith said as I lifted the evening dress up. "I refuse to believe that my husband is a traitor to Britain. I've decided if he returns and we haven't made any progress, I will simply ask Horace for the truth."

"He may not tell you anything." I couldn't keep from giving the warning as I started on the buttons. "My father and brother kept me from the truth and it took their death and five years before I learned what Jonathan was doing. I don't even know if my mother was privy to the truth when she was alive."

Lady Leith heaved a sigh. "Men do have the habit of believing ladies are too fragile to know the truth." Out of habit, she sat in front of the dressing table. "When, really, nine out of ten times, their version of protecting us only leads into more trouble than the truth would have been."

We shared an understanding glance in the mirror and I set about ensuring her hair was in place. "In any event, I intend to know what he does and where he goes when he leaves me here for weeks on

end,” she said firmly. “I will not tolerate that mystery or secrecy any longer.”

“Do you know which necklace you would like to wear tonight?” I asked, tucking one last stray strand of hair back into place.

“I am satisfied with my locket,” she said after a moment’s pause. “With no one but myself and the dowager at dinner, I see no need to bring out the emeralds or any of the more ornate pieces.”

When I thought back to the times when she’d insisted on the full formality for dinner, the change in attitude was surprising. Celia caught my eye in the mirror once again. “It is my home and I am determined to be comfortable.”

“Of course, my lady.”

She chuckled as she stood up. “I’ve tried for so long to live up to the dowager’s expectations for a baronet’s wife. I haven’t done a very good job of it, so now I think it’s time for me to set my own rules and expectations.”

“Now you sound like the lady of the house,” I said with approval.

Lady Leith tilted her head, facing me. “Is this what you did for the other young ladies you worked for? Finding ways for them to be confident in themselves?”

With a slight laugh, I shook my head. “Well, Miss Dunbar was beyond my help.”

“But you did help Miss Anderson and Mr. Melbourne notice each other, did you not? And Miss Burnham found her Mr. Landon while you were in the Burnham household.”

She really had read my references and done her own investigation of Julie Nelson’s background. “Miss Anderson made her own decisions. I merely encouraged Mr. Melbourne not to make the wrong one,” I said, correcting her. “Their choice to pursue a relationship with each other had nothing to do with me.”

“You may lie to myself, but you cannot deny that you knew they would be good for each other.”

I couldn’t keep from smiling, remembering the letters I’d recently received. “I *hoped* they would be a good match. That is an entirely different matter. I would never claim to be a matchmaker.”

Shaking her head, Lady Leith left the dressing room, and I picked up the walking dress to put away. Trusting her with the truth had been the best decision I’d made in a long time.



OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Lady Leith and I settled into a new routine. Instead of me going about my duties alone in the dressing room, she invented excuses to be there to review the ciphers with me.

She located a volume of sonnets and, one by one, we went through each one. It would only take a few minutes to know whether either of the ciphers would make sense with the first word pulled from the sonnet. None of them resulted in any success and I would make a note of it so that we did not forget which ones we had used.

Instead of being discouraged, Lady Leith began to search the shelves of the library. While I cared for my responsibilities—the ones I could not put off and were necessary to continue in my pretence—she scoured book after book for anything that would make sense of the numbers.

Miss Hanson became like a shadow whenever I stepped foot out of the dressing room. Her presence meant I could never say anything beyond the most mundane of observances.

While I was considering how I would go about escaping the woman's keen eye, Lady Leith swept into the room. "You seem satisfied with yourself," I dared to comment, seeing the smug expression on her face.

"Well, I sent Mr. Stone off on a wild goose chase since he was so stubbornly remaining in the office," Lady Leith said, her tone filled with pride. "I wished to find my husband's hiding place for his papers for myself."

"Poor Mr. Stone. He'll never get his work done with the pair of us disrupting him." I wove my needle into the hem of the gown I was repairing. "Did you make sure you closed the ink? I hear he is particular about such things."

"I had no need to touch the ink, and he can have no reason to complain. I have as much right to be in there as anybody on this estate." Lady Leith paced the room, her smugness fading away into nervous energy. "I never would have believed Horace had kept all my letters to him. We were betrothed for nearly a year before we were married, you know. A week would not go by without me penning a letter to him."

Actually, I hadn't known such a detail. Lady Leith cherished her

privacy, and I had never met her or her husband before Bath. Sitting back, I kept quiet as I watched her move around the room. She clearly wished to air her thoughts out.

“Isn’t it more a woman’s habit to keep letters?” she asked, her tone thoughtful. “Why would he keep them hidden away in such a place?”

“I would imagine he kept them for the same reason you and I save letters.” I’d kept my fair share of letters, most being clandestine ones from Henry Bladen. Did I still have them? I could not remember, but if I did, I would have to consign them to a fire as soon as possible. “They must be important to him.”

“I suppose that could be true.” She sounded unconvinced. Did she really doubt her husband’s affection that much? “I wish I could be certain. What if he kept them out of sight because he does not wish to be reminded of my sentimental behaviour?”

I couldn’t keep from laughing. “If that were the case, he could have simply destroyed them. I think you must simply accept that he kept the letters because he wished to do so. Did you find anything else of interest in Sir Horace’s office?”

“Only that Mr. Stone is in dire need of a better system of organization. I have no idea how he can find anything in there, let alone see when something is out of place.”

The door of the dressing room opened, making Lady Leith spin to face it. “Excuse me, my lady,” young Fanny said, bobbing a curtsy. “Mr. Jenkins wished me to inform you that a carriage is just pulling up.”

“That would be the first of my guests,” Lady Leith said as she smoothed the front of her gown. “Thank you, Fanny. Please ensure the dowager is informed as well. She will want to be on hand to greet them with me.”

Curtsying again, the maid hurried to fulfil her task. “I do wish I hadn’t given into the dowager in this,” Celia said in a low tone. “If I’d waited just a little longer, I could have invited ones we could learn something from and this party could be more than an awkward, uncomfortable affair.”

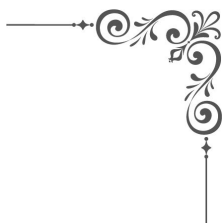
“Well, since we are not so fortunate, we can only make the best of it. Who do you imagine has arrived so early?”

“As nothing has gone to plan, I can only assume it is the dowager’s friends she insisted be invited.” Lady Leith caught my hand. “I hope you understand how much I will rely on you to help

me keep my sanity.”

“I shall do my best.”

At least with guests in the house, it would be nearly impossible for Miss Hanson to spy on me and I would be able to keep *my* sanity.



Chapter Nine

A guest's entrance into a large house was one of calm welcome.

Footmen took charge of luggage, which maids then unpacked if the lady arriving had not brought a personal attendant of her own. Tea was on hand in the kitchen in case the new arrivals were in need of some refreshment after their journey.

All of this went on without any assistance from me. I could hear the footmen and maids passing through the hallways as I went about my own work. In a smaller house, I may have been required to see to the needs of the lady guests, which would have been an interesting though unwelcome experience.

By the time evening fell and Lady Leith returned to the dressing room, the majority of the guests had arrived. "The Reynolds, the Williamsons, and the Carters are settled in their rooms," the lady said as she entered. "I expect Colonel Goodwin and his wife, as well as Sir Henry and his wife, to arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"And has it been as terrible as you expected?" I asked, a bit cheekier than I ought to have been.

"That the invited gentlemen are not equal to the unmarried misses has sparked the expected disappointment," she said instead of answering me. "Poor Mr. Aaron Carter. I'd forgotten he will be the only single gentleman present. The Williamson girls and Miss Reynolds will soon be competing for his attention."

"I hardly think he will find it such a trial. In my experience, young men are delighted when they find themselves the centre of attention."

“Mmm. Some of them.” Lady Leith turned so that I could undo her dress. “For ones who are more reticent by nature, and those who have no immediate interest in marriage, such attention can be highly embarrassing. Mr. Carter is one such example. I’m afraid he will find his time here somewhat trying.”

“Perhaps the older gentlemen will take pity on him and assist him in keeping out of the young ladies’ clutches.” I held up the sapphire evening gown for her consideration.

“One can hope,” Lady Leith said, giving an approving nod. “However, since three of the gentlemen are eager to have their daughters married, I am not holding my breath on this matter.”

I helped her into the evening gown. She sat down so that I could arrange her hair. “And I will wear my sapphires this evening, Juliet,” she said with a slight smile. “I do have guests in the house, so I must look my best.”

Handling Lady Leith’s jewellery had been a task that made me nervous. I’d only had a pearl necklace when I had my come out. Eugenia Burnham had similarly possessed simple jewellery: an amethyst pendant and a pearl necklace. Miss Dunbar had yearned for more elegant jewels to adorn her neck, but her father had been wise enough to refuse her constant demands.

Thus, the precious gems that made up Lady Leith’s collection were the first I’d ever handled.

“You’re not going to break it just by picking it up and carrying it,” Celia said with a laugh when she caught sight of how gingerly I placed the necklace around her neck. “Gold and gems are not so fragile.”

“Yes, I am aware,” I said, frowning as I worked the clasp. “I never even touched my mother’s jewellery. They were too pretty and...too expensive for me to touch, if that makes any sense.”

She laughed softly. “I felt the same way when Sir Horace presented me with the family jewels, along with some special purchases he’d made especially for me. I didn’t realise how accustomed I’d become to being Lady Leith.”

“You put on a good pretence.”

Her cheeks flushed a deep hue. Celia stood up and moved away from the dressing table. “Do you know I realized something else today?”

“What would that be?” I asked, amused by her embarrassment.

“Sir Henry Johnson knew your brother.”

My heart skipped a beat as my breath caught in my throat. "He did?" The name was not one I was familiar with, proving my fear that I did not know all of my brother's friends.

"Yes. Five years ago, I had only recently become engaged to Sir Horace, and it was while I was visiting my grandmother in Bath that I met your brother. Sir Henry was frequently included in our outings. In fact, if I remember correctly, he was the one who informed me of Mr. Sinclair's death."

Astonished, I grasped the side of the table to steady myself. Another gentleman with a name beginning with 'H'. Lady Leith stepped forward, reaching out. "Oh, dear. Perhaps I should not have told you."

"No, I am glad you did," I said quickly to reassure her. "It is a surprise, nothing more. I'd assumed my brother had multiple friends with names, either first or last, that began with the same letter. You see now the futile task I have set for myself to examine them all? I did not even know of this man."

She put her hand on my shoulder, her expression serious. "Your brother, as anyone, deserves justice for what happened. We will find a way. Somehow. Or, you will know that you did all that you could."

"Of course." I straightened up. "Well. There's no sense going over it all here. Your guests await you."

"True. I may be only a baronet's wife, but even I must adhere to the rules of polite society."

With that, she left me alone with my thoughts. Instead of eliminating a suspect from my list, I had added a new one. Would Sir Henry have new information for me?

"What a tangle," I said aloud. "How am I going to unravel it?"



AS I MADE MY WAY DOWN the servants' staircase, my mind was in a whirl about the implications of another 'H' to investigate. Would it be feasible for Lady Leith and I to put our minds together and create a list of those we knew Jonathan had been acquainted with, with names beginning with that letter I had begun to dislike?

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn't take notice of someone beside me in the hallway. At least, not until fingers wrapped around my arm and I was pulled to a stop.

"A moment of your time, Nelson," Mr. Stone said, his tone low

and threatening.

He tightened his grip as if to keep me from fleeing. By calling me 'Nelson' instead of Miss Nelson, he showed he had no respect for my position in the household. I was not about to allow the slight to pass. "As you are squeezing my arm in such a painful manner, *Mr.* Stone, I take it I have no choice in the matter," I said, not lowering my voice a bit.

After all, I had no reason to fear someone hearing and coming to investigate. But if he were seen accosting me, it would not go so well for him. Such was my hope, anyway.

The man scowled at me, his forehead creased. "Let us go to my office as you seem to enjoy being in there."

"Your office?" I repeated with a forced laugh. "How astonishing. I understood Sir Horace made use of the room when he is in residence. Can it really be termed *your* office if such is the case?"

"As I use the room more than Sir Horace, yes. It is my office." He pushed on my arm as though he were trying to hurry me along. "You have a great deal to answer for, Nelson, and I want those answers now."

"You may ask your questions here just as easily as in your office," I said, bracing my feet on the floor. "Only be quick about it. I have important matters to attend to."

He actually laughed at that. "I highly doubt that, and you are in no position to make demands. Now, start walking before I make you cooperate. You won't enjoy it if I have to go that far."

"Mr. Stone! What is the meaning of this?" Mrs. Horner's voice rang out, properly horrified. "Release Miss Nelson at once!"

A moment passed and I thought he was going to ignore the command. But then, Mr. Stone did just that, even going so far as to take a step back. "Mrs. Horner, I have a matter to discuss with Lady Leith's maid," he said in a haughty tone. "I assure you nothing untoward was occurring."

"Nothing untoward? You say that when I could clearly see you holding onto her in such an ungentlemanly manner?" Mrs. Horner strode to us, her eyes flashing with emotion. "If that is your idea of untoward, sir, I can see I cannot trust any of my girls to be in your presence."

"Mrs. Horner, this is a matter of estate security," Mr. Stone said, a deep flush creeping up his neck. "This woman has—"

"What nonsense!" Mrs. Horner interrupted him with growing

indignation on my behalf. "What does a lady's maid have to do with estate security?"

In the span of a few minutes, I had descended in his opinion from merely 'Nelson' to not even deserving to be named. He really had been offended and upset by the intrusion into the office. Why did he take it so personally?

"I believe she has been disturbing my work," Mr. Stone said with forced dignity.

"And you did not care to speak to her ladyship about this? What a shocking breach of protocol! I expected better of you, Mr. Stone!"

"I did speak to her ladyship, however, Lady Leith has failed to dismiss the woman. Therefore, I have taken it upon myself to—"

"Is that what this is about? Her ladyship has already spoken to me of the matter," I interrupted, feigning astonishment. "She accepted my explanation of what happened. I believed the matter settled."

Two pairs of eyes focused on me. "You lie! If she had spoken to you, you would have been dismissed immediately!" Mr. Stone exclaimed. "We have no use for sneak thieves in this house."

"Oh, and now something has been stolen?" Mrs. Horner asked, her tone mocking. "I suggest you make up your mind about your story, Mr. Stone. As it is, it changes with every breath. What is it that has been taken from you?"

How odd that Mrs. Horner would be so eager to argue with the steward. Had the man been disagreeable to her as well? If he had, why?

"It is clear to me the entire household is in need of discipline," Mr. Stone said with obvious scorn. He tugged his jacket straight. "The dowager—"

"The dowager is no longer the mistress of this house!" Mrs. Horner exclaimed. "What has she to do with this matter? Has something of the dowager's gone missing? Miss Nelson does not have access to the dowager's rooms, so she cannot be blamed for this."

Mr. Stone's eyes narrowed and he raised his hand to point at my face. "That is not—" He broke off and shook his head. "This is not over, do you hear me. You have not won."

With that cryptic threat, he spun on his heel and strode along the hallway. "Well! The nerve of that man," Mrs. Horner said with a huff. She faced me, concern taking the place of her indignation.

“What was he on about?”

“I entered his office in search of something and was careless enough to leave the ink uncapped after I made a note,” I explained, keeping to the bare details. After all, it was mostly true. “Lady Leith has heard both sides and has warned me to be more careful in the future. I don’t know what he meant about something gone missing.”

“Well, he has always behaved as though he were better than us all. It would do him good to be taken down a peg or two.” She shook her head. “Before he makes any more trouble, perhaps you might ask Lady Leith to put him in his place. For now, your dinner is waiting.”

In response, my stomach gurgled in a most unladylike manner. “I am well ready for it,” I said with a laugh. “Not even Mr. Stone can put me off my meal.”



WHEN I REPORTED THE incident to Lady Leith later that night, she pursed her lips together. “He is unswerving in his determination to ensure all is as it should be,” I added, since I did understand the man’s anger. After all, I *had* been sneaking around in his work space. I suspected his anger was more that he’d failed to lock the door when he left.

Still, I wondered why he locked the door in the first place. Nothing truly of value was kept there from what I had seen. Or was it common for stewards to lock their office doors?

“Be that as it may, it is his instinct to turn to the dowager that I cannot excuse,” Lady Leith said. She drummed her fingers on the table surface. “He has made it clear he has no respect for my position as mistress here. I told him I would handle the situation. After all, you are my maid.”

“What do you intend to do?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I’m not sure. He is employed by my husband, and he is a diligent worker. I may give him a warning that I will not stand for any disrespect and will discuss it with Horace when he returns.”

“Do you think your husband will not take action?” After all, he hadn’t so far and I was well aware how frustrated Lady Leith had become.

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in her answer. “Why would he? I have been far too lax in establishing myself as the mistress here,

and I only have myself to blame for that. In trying to learn and adapt myself to the traditions here, I have made it harder for the servants to respect me and any decisions I make.”

“I think you have more support among the servants that you believe,” I said as I brushed her silky hair. “Mrs. Horner would not back down when she came to my rescue earlier. If she’d been a man, I believe she would have challenged him to a duel.”

My words drew a laugh from Celia. “I’m surprised she allowed her gender to dissuade her.”

“Can you imagine Mr. Stone and Mrs. Horner meeting at dawn with pistols?”

“Mr. Stone is too respectable and honourable to allow it to go that far, I’m afraid. He would issue a polite apology for any offense.”

Which he hadn’t done when he confronted *me* and he certainly hadn’t apologized to Mrs. Horner. He’d ended the conversation with a warning. Mr. Stone had come across as a man who kept his word, so what was he planning now?

“Why do you look so worried?” Lady Leith’s question drew me from my thoughts.

One would have thought six months would have taught me how to keep my emotions from my face. Servants, ones who had been trained from early on, knew how to do so. Why couldn’t I learn how to do it?

“I just wonder what Mr. Stone will do once you warn him to mind his own business.” I set aside the hairbrush and began to separate her hair into three sections. “He said it wasn’t over.”

“If he has any of the intelligence my husband gives him credit for, he won’t do anything. That’s the point of me talking to him so that he will leave us both alone.”

“If he dislikes me as much as I believe he does, for whatever reason, I doubt he will change his opinion just because you speak to him about it.” I finished the braid and tied it off with a ribbon. “In fact, I suspect he will simply become more circumspect in seeking ways to get me sent away from Clarendon.”

Sighing, the woman stood up. “Why do I feel as though my home has become a battlefield?”

Guilt flooded through me. I had brought this conflict to her door, though that hadn’t been my intention. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault. As I said, I’ve done this to myself. I

would have had to confront him sooner or later.” She offered a slight smile. “I have every confidence that you and I shall prevail. After all, we have more to gain and lose in this fight, do we not?”

Though I gave a nod, I didn’t completely agree with her words. I’d already lost my family; what more was there to lose? My reputation? Few people even remembered me anymore.

“Do you wish to continue studying the ciphers before you retire?” Lady Leith asked, picking up the book of poetry from the dressing table. “Or are you too tired to even think about numbers?”

“To be honest, I don’t believe I have the mental capacity to focus on numbers.”

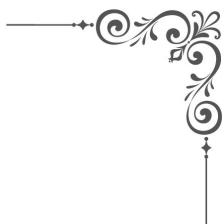
“Well, your half day is tomorrow, is it not? I shall leave this where you can easily find it.”

“Thank you.” I forced a smile. “Perhaps I shall find Mr. Leith and irritate Miss Webber some more.”

Lady Leith made a sound which sounded suspiciously close to a snort. “I wish you would not. We have a great deal on our hands as it is. Miss Webber wailing about your pursuit of my brother-in-law would be too much.”

She swept from the room. Shaking my head, I set about to put the room to rights.

A few hours of privacy was just what I needed.



Chapter Ten

On Sunday afternoon, I couldn't find a moment of privacy. Even in my own room, I could hear the chatter of the other maids as they rushed through the hallways to get their work done unseen and unnoticed. I knew the gardens and maze would be off limits with the guests in residence, ruling out a peaceful walk.

I fled to Mrs. Horner's private room to escape the footsteps and chattering voices, only to find the housekeeper already there. "Miss Nelson!" she exclaimed with a beaming smile. "Come and sit. I'll have tea brought in and we can have a comfortable cose."

Gossiping with the kindly woman was far from what I'd had in mind. It didn't seem likely that I would be able to play the pianoforte, though, so I murmured my thanks. I sat across from where she was already sitting as she pulled the rope to summon a maid.

Perhaps she would at least have some bit of useful information. Given the luck I'd had of late, I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"I am so glad we could both take some time away from our duties at the same time," Mrs. Horner said when she returned to her chair. "I hope Mr. Stone kept himself to himself."

She seemed to be genuinely concerned as she gazed at me. "I've hardly seen him at all today," I said. "Her ladyship has said she will not stand for him to be disrespectful to anyone in the household, so I hope he has a care for how he conducts himself."

Mrs. Horner let out a snort. "He has never been inclined to leave well enough alone. One would think he was master of this house

from the way he behaves some days.”

What an odd statement to make. Before I could question her on the point, the door opened and tea was brought in. I waited until Fanny had set the tray down and retreated. “I get the feeling you are not fond of Mr. Stone. Has he always been so...” I struggled to find the right word.

“Disagreeable? Not at all,” Mrs. Horner said readily. She poured tea into a cup and offered it to me. “When he was a boy, he was a charming scamp. Obedient, but up to all the usual mischief boys get into.”

“I take it his disposition changed once he became steward?” I accepted my cup and lifted it to my lips for a sip.

The woman heaved a sigh. “I’m afraid so. He so wants to succeed that I fear he has lost sight of what is truly important for someone in his position. I’m sure he means no harm in being so serious in adhering to what he believes is right and wrong in Clarendon.”

“I suppose he must be commended for taking his responsibilities so seriously. If only he accepted Lady Leith as mistress of the house. His habit of running to the dowager when a decision is not what he thinks is right makes things more difficult than they need to be.” It was bold for me to make such a statement.

“Indeed. But I wager my lady will not stand for it much longer,” Mrs. Horner said with a nod. “A few months ago, she might have let this pass, but not anymore.” She sent a sly smile towards me. “Perhaps you know why she has become so decisive?”

Instead of answering, I sipped my tea. “I’m surprised Sir Horace hasn’t made more of an effort to make sure his wife has the respect she deserves. I mean no disrespect, of course.”

“Of course. I’ve often thought it a shame that Sir Horace is away so often these past few years. I can only assume Lady Leith hasn’t mentioned how she has been treated, the poor dear.”

Somehow, I didn’t think Celia would appreciate being called a ‘poor dear’ by the servants, even if it was kindly meant. “I only hope that her decisions are supported below stairs and not looked upon with resentment.”

“The few who would have done so have already been sent on their way,” Mrs. Turner said with a calm smile. She lifted her tea cup. “As for any other dissenters, I have my own ways of handling them.”

Her confidence lightened my spirits. There were some housekeepers who would take advantage of a mistress' uncertainty. Mrs. Horner hadn't done so. Was her loyalty to Clarendon or Sir Horace? She didn't seem to have a qualm about the new Lady Leith taking charge of the house, so perhaps it was a dislike of the dowager?

"How long has Mr. Stone been steward? Did he work in some other capacity on the estate?"

Mrs. Horner frowned as she sat back in her chair. "I suppose it has been four years now. Mr. Stone was taught for a year by the former steward, before Mr. Geoffrey retired. He's had plenty of time to learn his position and not make an insufferable nuisance of himself."

That wasn't an answer to my question but I hesitated to press the issue. After what had happened, a little curiosity would be understandable, but to show too much interest would only result in scrutiny I did not desire. In any event, there was a light tap on the door, which then opened. "Excuse me, Mrs. Horner," young Fanny said, her voice shaking. "Cook says there's a problem with tonight's menu."

"Never a dull moment, I'm afraid," Mrs. Horner said with a sigh. She set aside her tea and stood up. "It seems our chat must end for now, Miss Nelson. Please feel free to make use of the room as long as you need."

The silence that followed the woman's exit was refreshing. Breathing out, I put my own tea down and rose from my chair. I walked to the pianoforte that was against the wall. As I sat down on the bench, I ran my finger over the delicate keys.

Music felt like my one consistent escape since I had embarked on my ambitious quest. In each house I had visited, there was an instrument somewhere in the house I was allowed to make use of. As playing had been my one comfort after my parent's death, it was a constant I was glad of.

Instead of searching through the music Mrs. Horner possessed, I closed my eyes and began to play from memory. My fingers moved across the keys with ease. I remained at the instrument for near an hour, recalling all the songs I used to play for my family.

When I let my hands fall to my lap, I breathed out a sigh. The music had calmed my thoughts and renewed my confidence. I was going to see my quest through to the end, one way or another.



FROM A WINDOW IN THE main part of the house, I watched Sir Henry Johnson and his wife arrive. He was an older man, and walked with a slight limp. As he escorted his wife up to the front door, I couldn't help but think he did not look like a man who had conspired to kill my family and plotted against the country.

Looks could be deceiving, however, as I knew very well.

Where had my brother met Sir Johnson? The age difference made them unlikely companions. How long had they known each other? Had they been close or had their acquaintance been more of a passing one?

My thoughts were interrupted by an accusing question, "What brings you to this part of the house? You're not supposed to be here."

Miss Han's sharp voice grated on my nerves. "I could say the same of you," I said, turning to face her.

She raised her chin as she drew closer. Her lilac perfume wafted into my face and was nearly suffocating with how thick it was. "As if I need to explain myself to you. You forget I have worked for the dowager for nigh on fifteen years. I am free to go where I please in this house. You have not earned that privilege."

"I am employed by the current mistress of the house. One might say I have more right in being beyond questioning." Were we really comparing which of us were more important in the house? Hadn't we already done this?

"More right? You? A maid with little experience, hardly any skill, who has enthralled a mistress who does not know her own mind?" Miss Hanson gave a laugh. "Once Sir Horace returns—"

"He will take a great interest in how his beloved wife has been treated, I am sure." I wasn't even ashamed to interrupt her. "If I had to guess, the disrespect shown to Lady Leith will not go unpunished. No matter where on the social ladder it comes from."

As I stepped around her, Miss Hanson said, "Perhaps if there was a proper mistress in charge, there wouldn't be disrespect from those belowstairs."

How dare she put the blame on Celia when it was clear it was the dowager causing the trouble? "I'm sure when Sir Horace returns, we shall all learn how he views the matter."

"Oh, I believe he will be infuriated to learn you were prying in

his private affairs and sneaking into his office. You shall be dismissed on the spot. What will you do without a reference from her ladyship, I wonder?" Her gleeful tone spoke to how much she desired her words to come true. "Will you have to seek a protector? Or watch time slip you by?"

There were so many aspects to her little speech that infuriated me. How dare she make such insinuations? Mr. Stone had been spreading tales, which should not have come as a surprise? Instead of responding, as it would clearly be a waste of my time, I continued on my way. Trying not to seem as though I were in a hurry, I left the main part of the house.

The nerve of the woman! Did the dowager really dislike Celia so much she had influenced Miss Hanson's view? It was the only reason I could think of behind the woman's venomous remarks. "She is in need of being brought down a few pegs as much as Mr. Stone," I muttered under my breath.

As I went down the narrow staircase, I encountered Fanny coming up. "What's happened, Miss Nelson?" she asked immediately. Her forehead creased with concern. "Has a mistake been made in the rooms?"

"What? Oh, no. Nothing of the sort, I assure you," I said swiftly. As the girl didn't look appeased, I explained, "Miss Hanson has set me on edge, nothing more."

She heaved a sigh. "Who is not on edge because of Miss Hanson? If she gets caught snooping around the maids' rooms again, Mrs. Horner is going to give her what-for. Even if she is Lady Anne's personal servant."

A chill went down my back. "She's done what?"

Clearly delighted to impart news and in no hurry to continue her work, Fanny gave an emphatic nod. "Twice she has been caught coming out of rooms that were not her own. Rooms she had no business being in. One of them was the one I share with Mary and Sally. I demanded to know what she thought she was doing, but she said I ought to mind my place. But I went straight to Mrs. Horner."

"Which other room was she in?"

"Oh, the other girls' room," Fanny said dismissively. "Though Minnie swears she thought Miss Hanson was trying your door earlier today when Mrs. Horner questioned her. That's all I know."

Miss Hanson's odd statement about time came back to me. I kept my father's watch on my little dressing table. Could she have found

another key and let herself in my room?

“Miss Nelson? Are you well? You look pale.”

Letting out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding, I focused on her. “Has her ladyship been informed about this?”

Fanny shook her head. “Mrs. Horner thought her ladyship had enough to worry about without below stairs being in an uproar. After all, what can be done? It’s not like the old bat is going anywhere.” Her expression took on defiance as she uttered the less than flattering phrase.

“True enough. Thank you for telling me.” It was true Miss Hanson would be in the house as long as the dowager was in residence. However, there were ways to make a person *wish* they were elsewhere. The younger Burnham girls had been masters of that particular skill and I just might have to try it myself.

The girl tilted her head. “What are you planning, miss?”

I let out a laugh. “What makes you think I’m planning something?”

She snorted and shook her head. “I have six siblings, miss. I’ve seen less devious looks from my brothers when they have plans to torment us girls.”

“Well, I am not planning anything.” For the moment, at least, that was the truth. “I was remembering one of my former employer’s had two daughters who delighted in mischief. I do wonder how they might have handled someone such as Miss Hanson.”

A peculiar smile twisted Fanny’s lips. “If they were anything like my brothers, I can imagine the chaos they must have created.” She bobbed a curtsy and hurried around me to continue her tasks.

I waited until she left the staircase and then went up myself. If Miss Hanson had been in my room, had she found any of the items I had hidden? Who knew what she would do with those letters if she had seen them. Would she guess at their significance or ignore them for something she understood?

My hand trembled as I unlocked the door to my room. Even before I crossed the threshold, I breathed in the faint smell of lilac. The memory of Miss Hanson’s cloying perfume came back. I didn’t have to go another step to know that the impertinent woman had trespassed into my room.

On the dressing table, Father’s watch was now closed where I was certain I had left it open earlier. It was also in the centre of the

table instead of to the side. If Miss Hanson had intended her invasion to go unnoticed, she had failed. Did she expect me to do nothing about this offense?

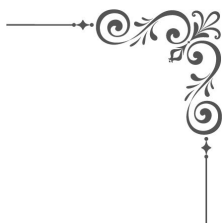
“Fool. Fool. Fool!” I wasn’t sure whether it was myself who was the fool or Miss Hanson.

By my bed, the book of Shakespeare’s sonnets rested on the table. I took a deep breath as I picked it up. Dread coiled in my stomach when my quick look through the pages resulted in no folded slip of paper.

“No!”

Miss Hanson had taken the cipher. What would she do with it? Was she going to give it to her mistress, or, worse yet, did she intend to hand it to Mr. Stone? Why had she taken it? Just to cause mischief? Did it mean something to her or was it simply because *I* had it that had her interest?

Whatever the reason, Lady Leith had to be informed. Somehow, we had to salvage the situation before the worst happened.



Chapter Eleven

Of course, I couldn't summon Lady Leith with a written message to come to the dressing room. That would have drawn unnecessary attention to us both. At the same time, I couldn't wait for her to come in to dress before dinner. It may have been already too late to keep Miss Hanson from destroying everything, but I had to try.

There was, after all, more than one way to convey a message to someone.

My heartbeat was loud and fast in my ears as I hurried to Lady Leith's dressing room. It was as I had left it only a few hours before. She was wearing a pale green gown. From her wardrobe, I pulled a cashmere shawl that had a similar green in the pattern.

It would have to do.

Shawl in hand, I left the dressing room. Keeping to the main hallway, I went straight to the drawing room. When I was a few yards from the open door, I could hear the low chatter of voices.

"I'm sorry you missed the gentlemen, Sir Henry," Lady Leith was saying, her voice gracious and sincere. "I'm sure they will return soon. In the meantime, I hope we can endeavour to keep you entertained despite our gossip."

I couldn't hear the gentleman's low response but whatever it was made Lady Leith laugh. If I had not been focused on the loss of the cipher my brother had been in possession of, I might have been pleased to hear my new friend and employer so happy. She deserved it after the stress she had been under as of late.

And here I was about to ruin the moment of happiness. I took a

deep breath and slipped through the doorway. Keeping to the edge of the room, I allowed my gaze to move around the gathered company.

The only gentleman in the room was Sir Henry, making him stand out among the ladies. His black hair was greying and his face had many lines on it. The expression on his face was kind, but his eyes had a sharp intelligence in them that reminded me of Mr. Harper.

“Lady Leith, does that creature wish something?” one of the young ladies asked, her tone condescending. She was seated next to the dowager, so I assumed it was Miss Reynolds.

Lady Leith’s eyes flicked my way. Reminding myself to keep my eyes demurely down, I approached. “I brought you your shawl, your ladyship,” I murmured, thankful my voice was steady.

As she took the cloth from me, the faintest of frowns appeared on Celia’s forehead. “I was wondering where I had left that,” she said as if it were the most natural thing I should be there. “Thank you, Nelson.”

I curtsied and backed to the door. “You didn’t send for a shawl,” the same young lady said, her tone sharp.

“A superior maid is aware of what is needed without a word being said, Miss Reynolds,” Lady Leith said calmly. She draped the shawl around her shoulders. “One day I am sure you will understand.”

Outside the room, I breathed out. I could only hope Lady Leith had understood I needed to speak to her as soon as possible. From her words, I was certain she at least recognized that something had happened. We both knew all too well that a message could be sent in a variety of ways.

“My lady, you appear distressed,” I heard Sir Henry say, his tone tinged with concern.

Had my bold move been too much? “Oh, I had the sudden thought that it has been five years since a dear friend passed away. You remember Mr. Sinclair, do you not?” Lady Leith said a moment later. “Mr. Jonathan Sinclair.”

“Indeed I do. Such a loss.”

Oh, dear. Did she think I had appeared to prompt her to interrogate the man? I wished I could remain at the door and eavesdrop, but it would be impossible. I hoped Lady Leith would come to me soon. Hiding my clenched, shaking hands against my

skirt, I began to walk back to the dressing room.



NO MORE THAN A HALF hour later, Lady Leith entered. "I have torn my hem, Nelson," she said with a raised voice. She closed the door behind her and her expression shifted to one of concern.

"Juliet, what has happened? I have never seen you look so pale."

"The cipher is gone."

Her eyes widened. "What? How? You keep your door locked, do you not?"

"I do, but there was another key. My father's watch had been moved. I could smell perfume as soon as I stepped into my room. When I opened the book of sonnets where I kept the cipher, it was gone." Habit made me go to the wardrobe to find a replacement gown for her. We had a pretence to maintain.

Lady Leith groaned. "Who would have done such a thing?"

"I am certain it was Miss Hanson. Fanny told me the dowager's maid has been poking about the maids' rooms, no doubt making sure which was mine," I said. Selecting a pale yellow gown, I held it up for her approval. "She also said something to me earlier, which made me uneasy."

She gave a nod without giving the gown more than a brief glance. "What did she say?"

As I helped her out of her dress, I explained how Miss Hanson had approached me and the things she had said. I'd momentarily considered sparing Lady Leith from the maid's ruder comments, but I was too angry to censor myself. It was no doubt best that she knew what we were dealing with.

"This is outside of enough," Lady Leith said, her eyes sparking with anger. "I shall have the Dowager House opened up immediately. I won't even ask the dowager whether she is ready for the change. It shall be presented as inevitable."

"How will we get the cipher back?" I was more than ready to have the dowager and her maid far from us, but the cipher was irreplaceable.

"As you said, there are only two people Miss Hanson could have given the cipher," Lady Leith said as I buttoned up the back of the yellow dress. "I'm sure I can think of a way to get both of them to return the cipher."

"How?" Both the dowager and Mr. Stone had shown they were

not reasonable when it came to dealing with Celia.

“At dinner, I will simply announce that I left a puzzle in one of the books and now it is missing.”

Could such a simple approach really work? “You think whoever has it will give it up, just like that?”

“At the very least, Mr. Stone will know the cipher was not of your doing even though it was found in your room.” Lady Leith caught my hand. “When my husband returns, I’m going to insist Mr. Stone be replaced or be sent to Horace’s small estate in the north. He is causing unnecessary trouble.”

Her determination made me smile. “The mistress has made her decision.”

“I will not allow my children to be raised in an environment where I am not respected as the mistress of the house,” she said fiercely.

My suspicions were true then. “You’re sure?”

A becoming blush spread across her cheeks. “I believe so. I have not said anything until I could be sure. I’d wished my husband would be the first to hear the news.”

“Well, I’m sure a servant like myself doesn’t really count.” This was why she was so determined to prove her husband was not a traitor. The future of her unborn child was at stake, not to mention what would happen to the estate if the crown became involved. Would she lose Clarendon?

“Oh, Sir Henry does remember your brother,” she said, straightening her shoulders. “I haven’t been able to question him further. I’m not exactly sure what I intend to ask, but I refuse to allow this opportunity to pass by.”

She released my hand. “Now, however, I have arranged for my guests to explore the maze. Then, it will be time to dress for dinner.”

“I will have this hem repaired by then.” My nerves were too shaken for me to even contemplate doing anything out of the safety of the house.

“Try not to worry. We’ll see this through come what may.”

No doubt, Lady Leith meant her words to be reassuring, but I was in no mood to be comforted. Instead, I set aside the dress, certain it would only take a few moments to repair. Before I did anything else, I was moving all other items of value I possessed and hiding them where Miss Hanson would not dare trespass: in Lady

Leith's dressing room.

I CONTINUED ABOUT MY day without any sign of Mr. Stone or Miss Hanson, which I was not at all bothered by. Lady Leith had nothing new to report when she returned to the dressing room before dinner. The matter had come to a standstill, one which I hoped would not take long to overcome.

Still feeling on edge, I made my way down to the lower levels of the house. My meal would soon be brought to the housekeeper's room for me. I knew Miss Hanson required a tray brought up to her own room, which made me uneasy. What would keep her from invading my room once again while I was so far away?

Even though I knew she wouldn't find anything interesting, if she did, the thought of her in my room was unsettling. I had so little privacy as a servant. What I did have was important.

In the meantime, my appetite had fled though I knew I needed to eat something as I had only had breakfast earlier in the day.

"Mrs. Horner! Mrs. Horner!" Fanny called out as she rushed past me. "Mrs. Horner!"

Curious, I followed her past the housekeeper's room. The first course was already leaving the kitchen. "Fanny, it is not proper for you to be running around screeching in such a manner," the housekeeper said, her tone reproving as she came from the kitchen. "Lower your voice and explain what is wrong."

"Sir Horace has returned," the maid blurted out. "And he has company with him."

A moment of silence followed her words. "Has he?" Mrs. Horner said with more calmness than she must have been feeling. "Well, well, well. This is a surprise. Do you know how many have come with Sir Horace?"

"At least two other men. Mr. Williams sent me to inform you."

"He might have waited for a few more details before he did so. I presume her ladyship has also been informed?"

Fanny shook her head, her eyes wide with excitement. She didn't seem to realize this situation was one of a hostess' worst nightmares. In a house already filled with guests, what was to be done with newcomers? Where would they sleep? How long did they intend to stay? Why had Sir Horace not sent word ahead that he was returning?

One of the footmen appeared in the doorway. "Sir Horace requests trays be taken to the library for himself and his two guests," he said, holding himself with dignity. "He does not wish for the dinner arrangements to be disturbed."

"Of course. Do Sir Horace's guests plan on staying tonight?" Mrs. Horner asked, gesturing for the maids to get back to work.

"Mr. Williams did not say, ma'am."

"Well, we must be prepared nonetheless," Mrs. Horner said with a note of determination. "A little manoeuvring will be in order, but we shall manage."

She spun to go about her duties without even noticing that I was there. Breathing out, I retreated to the housekeeper's room. I had the feeling it would be a few minutes before my meal was brought due to the sudden change. What little appetite I'd had was gone.

So Sir Horace had finally returned and with companions. Who could he have brought? This couldn't have been a common occurrence, otherwise Lady Leith would have mentioned her husband's habit of bringing friends home.

Would Lady Leith confront her husband with what she knew as she'd said she would? Or would she wait to learn what she could before making a decision?

I didn't like being at the mercy of another person's decision. It was the one aspect of being a servant I'd never reconciled myself with. Perhaps even those who went into a life of service from a young age felt the same, but with little chance of breaking free they did not hope to break away from that aspect of servitude.

At least, once I finished my quest for the truth, I could return home. Though I would still be under another person's authority. My uncle wished to marry me off to...well, anyone he deemed suitable, it would seem.

If Miss Hanson had already given Mr. Stone the cipher, would he in turn be handing it over to Sir Horace?

"You're looking grim tonight, Miss Nelson," Fanny said as she set the tray in front of me.

With a start, I looked up at her. I'd been so involved in my thoughts, I hadn't even realized she'd come in. "I was thinking of the work in store for Mrs. Horner if Sir Horace's guests expect to stay tonight. It is quite an upset."

"From what I just heard, they intend to stay for a week."

"Egad, where shall they be put?" How could Sir Horace not

warn his wife of these plans? While he may not have expected her to be having a party while he was away, surely he would realize that any woman would appreciate a warning before being thrust into the role of hostess.

“The Williamson sisters shall have to share a room, and there is the small green room that was not being used,” Fanny said, giving a knowledgeable nod. “It will be tight Mrs. Horner says, but it will have to do.”

“Well, Mrs. Horner appears to have the matter well in hand.” After all, it was her responsibility to ensure the household ran without a problem. Of course she would solve the problem with aplomb.

“I hope one day to be as organized and calm as she is,” Fanny confided in a low voice. She bobbed a curtsy and then hurried back out, no doubt for her own meal.

My appetite was still missing, but I made myself pick up my fork anyway. It would give me something to do while I waited.



LADY LEITH WAS SCOWLING when she entered the dressing room. “I suppose you’ve heard the news already,” she said as she removed the pearls from around her neck. “Sir Horace has returned from wherever it is he goes off to, only, this time, he has returned with guests for me to entertain.”

There was a note of anger in her voice. Just as I had suspected she would be, she was far from pleased with her husband’s actions. “Yes, I’d heard,” I said, stepping to help her remove the evening gown. “I take it this is not something he has done before?”

“How could he?” Lady Leith asked, not seeming to have heard my question. “How could he think I do not need to be consulted about who stays in my home? Does he not realize how difficult it is to add that kind of work on the servants without warning? It is beyond comprehension!”

I pulled the gown over her head. “Would you be this upset if you did not have other guests in the house?” I asked as I undid the stays and then assisted her into her nightgown.

“Yes, of course I would be!” She sat down in front of the mirror and continued to scowl at her reflection. “It is unfair to me, and to the servants who work here, to just expect us all to accommodate my husband’s whims in this way.”

Carefully, I removed the hairpins from her hair. "Mrs. Horner took it all in stride. You are fortunate to have her as housekeeper. I don't think there is anything she is not willing to overcome."

"It doesn't make my husband's thoughtlessness any better!"

"Celia, you don't mean that."

Both Lady Leith and I spun around. Sir Horace stood in the doorway of the room. He wore a dressing gown over his shirt and breeches. Embarrassed to see him in such a state of undress, I averted my eyes. Why hadn't I heard him open the door?

"I only say what I mean, Horace," my employer said sharply. She faced the mirror and gestured for me to continue brushing her hair. "It was inconsiderate of you to do this to me."

"If either of us has any right to be upset, I think it should be me," Sir Horace said as he came further into the room. "Why would you have a party while I was away? What kind of impression does that give our neighbours?"

Wholeheartedly, I wished I was anywhere but in the room with them. I kept my eyes down. What would a servant do in this situation? Leave them to their conversation? Stand like a statue until I was dismissed?

"This party was not my idea," Lady Leith said, raising her chin. She stared at her husband's reflection in the mirror. "You have your mother to thank for this."

"It's difficult to believe that when the guests I have met are not the sort my mother frequently chooses to associate with."

"Well, what else was I supposed to do? Spend a week being badgered and insulted by the dowager's friends?" Celia brought her hand down on top of the dressing table. "You don't understand what she is like when you are not here, Horace. She makes life intolerable and I will not let her walk all over me anymore."

Moving as slow as possible to avoid drawing attention to myself, I set the hair brush down. "Celia, you're making too much of it. I know my mother can be difficult, but one only needs to know how to respond to her," Sir Horace said, putting his hand on his wife's shoulder. "In time—"

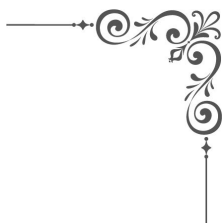
Lady Leith shook him off as she stood up. "So it's all my fault? I'm to wait and watch every word I say? Why am I not surprised you would take her side? You have never stood up for me. Why should I expect you to start now?"

Head down, I backed toward the door. "I didn't say that," Sir

Horace objected, his tone frustrated. “Why are you reacting like this, Celia?”

“Why am I upset that you leave whenever you wish, return whenever you wish, and now you bring guests with you whenever you wish? All without consulting me?”

I slipped out the room and closed the door behind me. Lady Leith would thank me in the morning, I was sure. No one wanted a witness to an argument between spouses.



Chapter Twelve

The next morning, as I finished my morning toilet, there was a light knock on my door. “Miss Nelson,” Fanny called. I heard her try the doorknob, but I hadn’t had a chance to unlock it yet. “Sir Horace is requesting to see you in the library. Immediately.”

Such a summons was not unexpected though, not at this hour. “Thank you,” I said, raising my voice. “Please have Lady Leith’s tray taken to her in the meantime. She should not be kept waiting.”

“Of course.”

It was at least an hour too soon for Lady Leith’s morning tea. I’d risen early to clean the dressing room, not having the courage to do so the previous night. If I had to guess, Mr. Stone had handed over the cipher to Sir Horace and I was being called to account for it. I was going to need my new friend’s help in getting out of this fix.

Before I left the room, I checked my appearance in the mirror. Black shadows no longer lurked under my eyes, and my skin was not as pale as I’d been when I first arrived at Clarendon. When I held my chin up, I thought I could see a resemblance to the dignity my mother had always exhibited. I would need all the confidence I could muster for this coming interview.

My steps were even and without hesitation as I made my way down to the library. The door was ajar when I reached it. Before I stepped in, I took a moment to rub my sweaty palms on my skirt.

As I entered the room, I spotted Sir Horace was seated at the desk in front of the large windows. My gaze shifted to the second person in the room, who stood behind the baronet.

Mr. Oswyn Harper. What was he doing here? *He* was one of Sir Horace's friends?

"Miss Nelson," he said, nodding toward me. His tone was cold. "We meet again. Why am I not surprised?"

"Good day, Mr. Harper." I curtsied, clasped my hands behind my back, and kept my eyes down. Through my eyelashes, I peered at Sir Horace. He had yet to say a word. "You asked to speak to me, Sir Horace?" I asked, anxious to get the conversation over with.

"I did," he finally said. His gaze was steady as he watched me. Was he trying to see me flinch? Was he trying to see through me? "Do you know why?"

His tone was impossible to read. "I have my suspicions," I said honestly. "My guess is that you have asked me here because Miss Hanson trespassed in my room and removed a cipher from the book I was reading. She then gave it to Mr. Stone who passed it on to you because of how strange it is."

Sir Horace's eyebrows went up. "That is an accurate guess, Nelson."

"You don't seem worried about the situation," Mr. Harper said, stepping closer to Sir Horace's chair.

Oh, if only he knew how much worry was twisting up my insides. I didn't even glance at him as I answered. "Why would I be worried? I have done nothing wrong."

"How do you know Miss Hanson is to blame for stealing the message from you? She has had a long history in this house and has always been honest," Sir Horace said, his tone sharp. "You would do well to think twice before accusing her of anything."

He knew it was a message and not some frivolous puzzle. "I have judged the evidence before me," I informed him. "Miss Hanson was seen around my door yesterday, and she has made it clear she dislikes me. What else was I to think when the cipher went missing, even though I always keep my door locked?"

"Why would you need to keep your door locked?" was his next question. "Do you have secrets to keep from us?"

He had no idea. "At my last post, the son of the house attacked me in my room," I said, keeping to the truth on this particular detail. "Lady Leith understood I felt uneasy without some security against such an attack happening again."

My honesty made both men tug at their cravats as though they were uncomfortable. I wished I knew what detail it was that

discomposed them. Was it that I, a woman, had been attacked, or that I felt the need to protect myself?

“Dunbar’s sudden ‘illness’ and removal from Bath,” Mr. Harper said in a low voice. He narrowed his eyes. “What did you do to him?”

I lifted my chin and met his gaze. “Only what I was forced to do, Mr. Harper. I warned him to leave me alone and then I defended myself when he did not listen to my warning. I was left little choice in the matter.”

Though he shook his head, there was an expression of admiration and amusement on Mr. Harper’s face. “How, exactly, did you defend yourself?”

Before I could answer, Sir Horace cleared his throat. “I don’t think we need to discuss the matter any further. I do want to know how it is you had this paper in the first place,” the man said, holding up the folded paper. “It does not belong to you.”

Of course he’d recognized it. If I said I’d found it in his secret compartment, he’d want to know why I’d been searching the office. I still wasn’t sure if either of the men were the mysterious ‘H’ mentioned in the cipher found in my brother’s papers. I could not trust either of them, even if they had been my brother’s friends.

“I know there was only one made and yet this is an exact copy,” Sir Horace continued, his eyes narrowing as he stared at me. “The hand alone is different. At some point you must have seen the original and made a copy. How did you come to have it? Come. Tell me!”

“She had it because I asked for her assistance in finding the key to solving the cipher,” Lady Leith’s voice rang out. Twisting around to hide my sigh of relief, I watched my employer sweep into the room. She had a dressing gown over her nightgown and her hair was a tangled mess. “She was comparing it to the poems in the book Miss Hanson removed the cipher from.”

“Celia!” Sir Horace exclaimed, standing up. His tone was one of astonishment. “What are you doing down here?”

“Good morning, Lady Leith,” Mr. Harper said, a blush appearing on his cheeks. He managed a respectful bow, showing more composure. “I was not expecting to see you at this hour of the morning.”

“Really, why did you not speak to me about this before disturbing my maid at her work?” Lady Leith demanded, keeping

her eyes on her husband. She showed no shame at being seen in such a dishevelled state. "Nelson answers to me and no other person. Not even you, Horace."

"My lady, Miss Nelson has been near other situations of national concern," Mr. Harper said, his tone reasonable. "We only—"

Lady Leith cut him off with a sharp glance. "Mr. Harper, my question was directed at my husband. Not to you."

National concern? The valet in the Burnham house had been stealing information from his employer and selling it to French spies. What other situation had I been near that had been of concern to the government?

The flush on Mr. Harper's face deepened and he took a step back. "Celia, please. Allow Harper and I to handle this matter," Sir Horace said, his tone soothing. "There are things you don't know —"

"And who's fault is that? Did you imagine that the secret compartment in the desk would remain undetected?" She raised her eyebrow at her husband. "I did find it strange for you to keep my letters in such a place with letters from the government."

Again, Mr. Harper was tugging on his cravat. He, if I had to hazard a guess, found the situation more uncomfortable than I did. Well, it served him right for being so high-handed! "Then, you were aware of the message being in Miss Nelson's hands?" he asked, daring to speak up again.

"Of course," Lady Leith said, barely glancing at him. "After all, two eyes on a problem can be better than one. Since my curiosity is such an inconvenience to you, I shall leave it in your hands and be on my way. With Nelson. I have no desire to go about in my night clothes any more than necessary. We do have guests in the house."

She spun on her heel and started for the door. "Come along, Nelson," she said over her shoulder. "My chocolate was cold."

Before I followed Lady Leith, I took a moment to appreciate the dumbfounded expressions on both men's faces. Matters had clearly not gone as they had expected. I did regret not knowing the key to the cipher and what it said. There was no way for us ladies to get it back in our hands without causing suspicions..

No one crossed our path as we went to the dressing room. "That was inconvenient," Lady Leith said just loud enough for me to hear as we entered.

"I wasn't sure what I was going to say," I admitted, closing the

door firmly. "Though I should have expected this to happen. I'm sorry I roused you in such an unconventional way."

"You were right to do so." Lady Leith sat down and covered her mouth to hide a yawn. "My husband's practice of returning home to be lord and master without a concern for what I have done or decided, is tiring. How dare he question you without bringing it to me first!"

The previous night's argument had not resolved any of her hurt feelings.

"I do wish we had discovered what the cipher said," she admitted with a sigh. "Not knowing will prey on my mind, I'm afraid."

"I completely understand," I said, moving to check the water in the pitcher. It was cold. I would have to take that up with Fanny. "I'm sorry I did not keep it in a better hiding place. Somewhere Miss Hanson would not have been able to find it. Or I ought to have thought to make another copy."

"It is not your fault. Who would have thought a locked door would not be sufficient." Lady Leith shook her head. "How Hanson found a key to your door, I do not know. Mrs. Horner is good about keeping her keys on her."

Out of habit, I went to the wardrobe. "What would you like to wear today?"

"What? Oh, the blue morning gown will suffice. There is nothing strenuous planned this morning, but we will be on the lawn later for games. I am hoping by the end of the party, the dowager house will be ready to be occupied. I refuse to have a sneak in the house."

I couldn't help but laugh at her statement. "You forget that I was the sneak not so long ago."

A reluctant smile came to her lips. "Yes, I suppose that's true but you were not a sneak to cause trouble. Your purpose in poking around was to find answers. Hanson did so simply to cause trouble. There is a difference."

"I'm sure she thought she was searching for answers." I laid aside the dress. "In any event, we have evaded one situation, but I don't think we are out of the woods yet. Nor are we closer to learning the truth."

"Have you met Mr. Harper before? He seemed to be glaring at you with immense disapproval and suspicion."

"He was my brother's closest friend," I said, remembering the

summers when Mr. Harper had come home with Jonathan. "He has also accused me of being a spy for France. I would say he is not fond of me."

Lady Leith tilted her head. "A friend of your brother and he hasn't recognized you as Juliet Sinclair?"

"Eugenia Burnham was also a friend when I was a child and she did not know me. It would seem a person only sees what they expect to see." Eugenia Burnham had also been distracted with the whirlwind of her season and so had no reason to look too closely at me.

Mr. Harper had been as close to me as any person could be and did not have distraction as an excuse for not recognizing me.

A maid brought in hot water, nearly dropping it when she saw we were there. Taking pity on her, I took the water and hurried her on her way. "Well, I suppose there is nothing else to be done now," Lady Leith said with a sigh. "We are no closer to knowing the truth behind my husband's actions."

"I am sorry there is so much discord between you."

"He ought not keep secrets from me or go around me under the pretence of 'protecting me.' In any event, I can only hope he will be polite to the rest of the guests and somehow we can manage not to let anyone know we have quarrelled." She gave an unladylike snort. "The dowager would just love that."



AS I WENT ABOUT MY duties that day, I kept expecting Mr. Harper to come out of the shadows to demand information from me. He had done so before, so why should this time be any different? Perhaps he was hesitant to annoy Lady Leith with such tactics? After all, she hadn't been afraid to stand up to him earlier.

The maid eyed me out of the corner of her eye when she brought me my breakfast, but she said nothing. Mrs. Horner swept in a few minutes later and kept up a cheerful dialogue of all the things she had to oversee that day, which included the opening of the dowager house. Her non-stop chatter revealed the truth: the staff knew about the discord between the master and his wife.

That they did not try to talk to me about it was a mixed blessing. What did they know? How much had they discussed?

"I don't know what to do," Mrs. Horner lamented, getting my attention. "I need someone to deliver a basket of food. With her

ladyship occupied with her guests and my own girls overloaded with work, there is no one for me to send.”

A chance to get out of the house? “I would be more than happy to take the basket for you. I’ve met Mr. Leith. He seems to be a charming young man and I am sorry his affliction keeps him so secluded.”

“Would you? Oh, thank you, Miss Nelson,” Mrs. Horner said with relief. “I know you have your own duties to see to.”

“I’m certain Lady Leith would understand. In fact, she may even envy me for being able to take the basket when she is not able to do it herself,” I said lightly. “She does enjoy her walks and visits with him.”

Mrs. Horner nodded, her expression sympathetic. “The poor dear. She does what she can but there’s some who do not like being replaced.”

She could only be referring to the dowager. We exchanged knowing looks and left the matter at that. Mrs. Horner said she would have the basket ready for me at two o’clock, which would give me time to complete the most important tasks of the day.

The thought of leaving the house and the increase in tension was an incentive for me to go about my work quickly. My half day had been stressful and not the least bit relaxing, so I was looking forward to a peaceful walk.

I heard distant laughter when I stepped outside. The party was playing games on the lawn and from the sound of it, they were enjoying themselves. Hopefully, Lady Leith was amused and distracted by the games as well.

It was a fine day to be out of doors. The sun was bright in the clear blue sky, and a gentle breeze provided some relief from the heat. Bees buzzed around the flowers and birds sang their songs from the tree branches.

How I’d loved days like this at my childhood home!

Before too long, the cottage was in front of me. Mr. Leith was seated on the grass, his sketchpad in his lap. He seemed to be examining a blade of grass. When he caught sight of me, though, he dropped the grass and stood up.

Just as before, Mr. Leith made an elaborate bow and then looked up at me with an expectant expression. Though he must have been no more than a year or so younger than I, there was a youthfulness about him that was endearing.

Making a deep curtsy, I smiled at him. Beyond him, I saw the curtain in one of the windows shift. Miss Webber was watching, and would no doubt be along soon to send me on my way. I closed the distance between myself and the young gentleman.

“What are you drawing?” I asked, gesturing to his sketchpad.

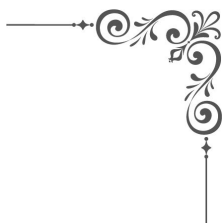
Bending down, Mr. Leith picked up the item, which he then held out to me. Curious to see what he wanted to show me, I set down the basket to take it from him. As he watched, I began to flip through the pages.

He really was a skilled artist, much better than I had ever been and I’d had the benefit of a master’s instruction! Had anyone ever tutored Mr. Leith? He’d caught birds in flight, a daisy in a field, even a few of Lady Leith. Glancing up, I smiled again and nodded to show my approval. His chest puffed up with pride as he grinned.

I turned to the last two pages he had been working on. The scene was of ladies playing a game of lawn bowling, and if I had to guess, from the imperfect lines, he’d been spying on the party. Of course he would look on from afar.

Then, my gaze shifted to the adjoining page. My breath caught in my throat as I recognized the sketch.

Henry Bladen’s profile was captured in perfect detail.



Chapter Thirteen

No. No, it couldn't be. But there was no mistaking what was in front of me. How could he be here? Why was *he* here? It was bad enough that Oswyn Harper had come, but now I would have to avoid someone else from discovering me?

A tap on my shoulder startled me enough to make me inhale. I hadn't even realized I'd stopped breathing. Lifting my gaze, I found Mr. Leith staring at me with a concerned frown. He made a sign with his right hand and then pointed at the page.

"I know him," I managed to say. "He is here?"

For a moment, Mr. Leith just stared at me. Then, he pointed at the pictures and then gestured in the direction of Clarendon House. Of course he had seen Mr. Bladen there. Where else would Mr. Leith have seen the gentleman?

"Miss Nelson." Miss Webber walked towards us, a polite but frosty smile on her lips. The miss sounded forced as though she didn't want to give me the courtesy. "What are you doing here? I would have expected you to be hard at work for Lady Leith as everyone proclaims you to be."

"Good day, Miss Webber," I said, forcing a smile of my own. Closing the sketch pad, I handed it back to Mr. Leith. I leaned down to pick up the basket. "Mrs. Horner sent this for you and Mr. Leith."

"And a lady's maid was the only person available to deliver it?" Miss Webber stepped forward and took the basket from me. "I would have thought this would be beneath someone of your position. Or were you simply anxious to see Master Simon?"

There was definite hostility in her tone. I had enough to worry about without having to be concerned about her suspicions and who she would tell them to.

"I am always glad to see Mr. Leith. He is an agreeable companion for anyone. As for why I was asked to deliver the basket, you know the house is busy with the party," I said, keeping my own tone even. "Mr. Leith was just showing me his sketches of the guests playing on the lawn."

"A likely story. Master Simon has not been near the big house in several months," Miss Webber said with a sniff. "Surely what he has shown you was from his own imagination."

For being a protective guardian, she clearly did not keep a close eye on her charge.

"Well, I suppose we must agree to disagree on that, and I will bid you good day, Miss Webber," I said as cheerfully as I could. Turning, I met Mr. Leith's gaze and offered him a nod. "Good day, Mr. Leith."

As I hurried away from the lonely cottage, I couldn't help but feel sorry for Mr. Leith. He was an intelligent young man, with a charming sense of humour. It was a shame he was kept isolated with only a suspicious woman to keep him company. He should have friends and conversation, even if they were done on paper.

No, I was being unfair. Miss Webber surely meant well. She had to be fond of Mr. Leith, in her own way. How could she not be after caring for him for so many years? She couldn't be completely heartless.

Shaking my head, I quickened my steps. None of that had any bearing on the new threat in my life. If Mr. Henry Bladen was a guest in the house, more than ever, I would have to keep out of sight. He knew me as myself, Juliet Sinclair, and I couldn't have him revealing my deception.

He must have been the second gentleman that had arrived with Sir Horace, but why? I knew I couldn't possibly have known all Mr. Bladen's friends, but it seemed strange they would have known each other. What business had brought them together? How long had they known each other?

This time, the sound of laughter and talking made me uneasy. Even though the servant's entrance was out of sight from where the guests were at play, they sounded too close for my comfort. The very thought of being seen made me slip inside as quickly as I

could, no thought to lingering in the fine weather.

How was I going to explain this new challenge to Celia?



“YES, MR. BLADEN ARRIVED with my husband,” the lady said with a hint of censure as she sat in front of the mirror. “I’ve never met him before, and I don’t believe Horace has ever mentioned him, even in passing. Why do you ask?”

“Because I *do* know him,” I said, keeping my eyes on her hair. I’d learned so much about dressing hair and took pride in what I was able to achieve. No one would find fault in my friend’s appearance. “In fact, five years ago, I expected to marry him.”

With a gasp, Celia twisted to look me in the face. “Honestly?”

“After my parents died—well, killed—he vanished from my life without a word,” I continued. If she was to know the truth, I was determined she would know all the sorry details. “For two years, I hoped he would return and have a reasonable explanation for why he stayed away. I wondered if he wanted to respect the fact that I was mourning my family.”

“And he never sent a single word?”

There was genuine outrage in her voice. “No,” I said, remembering the crushing grief when I accepted he wasn’t coming back for me. “Once I cried about it, I was furious. Angry that he’d fled when I needed him most. Angry that he hadn’t thought I was worth an explanation for why he left.”

“You had every right to be angry! His behaviour was unacceptable. I have a mind to take him to task for his cruel treatment. No man should be allowed to get away with such callousness!”

“Please do not. I think I did that well enough myself in Bath, and he might wonder how you know me when I have been secluded these past few years..”

“Have you seen him that recently then?”

Funny to think if I hadn’t become a lady’s maid for the Burnhams, I wouldn’t have crossed paths with Mr. Bladen again. “I encountered him for the first time since my brother’s death earlier this year. I’d been sent on an errand for the Bunrhams and there he was. Buying ribbons for his sister.”

“For his sister? I have two male cousins who love me as dearly as I love them and there are no circumstances where they would

ever make such an errand,” Lady Leith said, raising her eyebrow. “Did he at least do the honourable thing and acknowledge you?”

“Yes, and then he visited my great-aunt’s house to see me. He’s also sent letters to me through my aunt’s maid. He swears he kept away because my uncle insisted he do so. He has asked me to forgive him.”

Lady Leith gave a derisive sniff. “Even if that were true—he was compelled to keep his distance because of your family—he could have left you a note to explain instead of leaving you to wonder for so long. The gall of him to make such advances. Did he think your own affections were unchanged by time and distance?”

“He certainly seemed to think so. When I met him once again in Bath, I told him I did not desire his attention.” And how my anger had come as a shock to him! “I told him to leave me alone.”

“I take it he has no notion about your current position or name.”

I shook my head. “Only my aunt knows Juliet Sinclair is currently playing at being a lady’s maid named Julie Nelson.” I paused before I added, “No. There was another man, in Bath, who worked it out and tried to blackmail into doing what he wished.”

“Conrad Ingram.” If anything, the disdain in Lady Leith’s voice increased to outright hatred. “I met him once, though I won’t say it was an honour or a pleasure. I don’t think there was a single person who mourned him when he had that unfortunate accident.”

Personally, I had my own suspicions about his ‘accident’. Now that I thought about it, there had been an alarming number of accidents that were not accidents. “Did Sir Horace or Mr. Harper say why Mr. Bladen is with them?”

“My husband hasn’t said a word about what took him away or why he’s back,” Lady Leith said, turning to face her mirror. “Imagine that. Another ‘H’ in the house. What does that make? Four now?”

Surprised, I paused. “Sir Horace. Sir Henry. Mr. Harper. Mr. Henry Bladen,” I said, listing the names off. “Good heavens, you’re right. They all knew my brother in some way.”

“You say this Mr. Bladen remained away from you because of your uncle. Why did your uncle deem him so unworthy? Might he be the ‘H’ you have been searching for?”

“I don’t know,” I said, hesitating. I’d asked my uncle that question but had not received an answer. My stomach twisted before I added, “Would a man who had murdered an entire family

wish to marry the surviving member?"

"It is far-fetched, but I thought it worth mentioning. His behaviour, as you have described it, is far from gentlemanly, so it would not be a surprise if he were involved in something nefarious."

Henry Bladen? A traitor? Was it possible?

"I don't believe he was near Bath when Jonathan was killed," I said slowly. But doubts were swirling around my mind as I tried to remember. "But it has been five years. I may be mistaken on that point."

"He was close to your family, perhaps close enough to be referred to be the first letter of his Christian name?"

Had the answer been in front of me all this time? No, how could it?

"I would think Mr. Harper the likelier choice, since he was one of my brother's closest friends," I managed to say, trying to organize my thoughts. "But now that you mention it, Mr. Bladen has dogged my steps almost as closely as Mr. Harper has. They are always where I do not expect to find them."

"One way or another, I shall learn why my husband is associating with them both," Lady Leith declared as she stood up. "There must be a reason he chose to bring them both here. And I promise I shall ensure you are not sent anywhere near my guests. You are safe here."

She left the room to go down for dinner. I knew she meant well, but I did not feel safe. The idea of being trapped in the servants quarters was not one I relished, but as there was no other solution to how I could remain out of sight, I resigned myself to it.



AS I MADE MY WAY FROM the dressing room to my room, I came face to face with Miss Hanson. She gave a start when she saw me, her eyes widening. "You," was all she said as she came to a halt. What little colour was in her cheeks drained away.

"Good evening, Miss Hanson," I said as pleasantly as I could. There wasn't enough room for me to go around her. "I trust the dowager is enjoying the company? I remember how eager she was to have guests at Clarendon."

"Why are you still here?"

"Why am I in the stairway? Lady Leith has gone down for dinner

so I am on my way to my room," I said, feigning ignorance for what she meant. "Did you hear the strangest thing happened earlier this week. Someone went through my room and actually stole something belonging to Lady Leith."

She swayed, putting her hand on the wall. "If it belonged to Lady Leith, why was it in your room?" she managed to ask.

"Lady Leith asked for my opinion on the cipher, of course," I said, spreading my hands out. "And now my lady is concerned about who would have had access to the keys, since I was careful to keep my door locked. Mrs. Horner has promised to make an accounting of all the keys."

"And why would a maid need to keep her door locked?" Miss Hanson asked, rallying herself. "One might believe you to be hiding something."

"You may not be aware of this, Miss Hanson, but I was attacked by my previous employer's brother," I said, keeping my tone even. I refused to allow my gaze to drop. "A key to my door was a concession Lady Leith was more than happy to allow me when she hired me."

Miss Hanson stared at me. "Attacked? I'm sure you are exaggerating the matter."

Why was I not surprised she did not believe me? "Sir Horace was understanding when the matter was explained to him."

"Sir Horace knows?"

"Yes, he summoned me to the library this morning and Lady Leith joined us as well," I said. "I believe the matter has been resolved to everyone's satisfaction. A tempest in a teapot, really. And all over a silly puzzle."

Everyone was satisfied, that is, except Mr. Harper. He had not appeared content with Lady Leith's defence of me. I was still expecting him to come out of nowhere with more questions on the matter.

"I see. I suppose I should have known Sir Horace would be firmly under his wife's thumb," Miss Hanson said with a sniff. "The dowager had hoped he would measure up to his father's standards. She will be disappointed such is not the case."

If only she knew how at odds Sir Horace and Lady Leith were! It was probably just as well she did not. She and her mistress would try to use it for their advantage and then there would be real trouble.

“Enjoy your meal, Miss Hanson,” I said, stepping forward to continue on my way. One way or another, I was getting past her. “I hope you were able to return the key to wherever you found it originally or you will be able to do so soon. When a search is made, it wouldn’t be good for the key to be found in your possession, would it?”

Her cheeks flushed a deep red. “How dare you accuse me?”

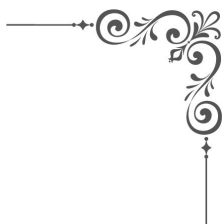
“How dare you trespass into my room and touch my things?” I countered. “I respect your loyalty to your mistress, but I warn you: do not think my loyalty to Lady Leith is any less than yours.”

Miss Hanson took a step back and her cheeks took on an even deeper hue. Without another word, she started down the stairs.

Her mischief hadn’t ended in the result she had hoped for. I was still in the house. Lady Leith was still taking action to be the undisputed mistress of the house. Once Celia succeeded, the dowager’s power, and Miss Hanson’s position, would lessen.

Once again, I was tired. More tired than I’d ever been before, even after Bath. And I hadn’t made any progress on learning the truth. Uncle Frederick would be back in London soon, and at that point I wouldn’t be able to continue being Julie Nelson.

Would I have to go through life knowing my family was murdered but never seeing the villain had been brought to justice?



Chapter Fourteen

The party broke up late that evening. I couldn't hold back a yawn as I helped Celia to undress. We did not have time to discuss anything because her husband entered without warning. "Celia, I really don't understand what has been happening here. Why did Mr. Stone tell me that you have ordered the Dowager House to be opened and cleaned?"

Again, he took no notice of me being in the room. When I moved to retreat, Lady Leith caught my wrist and kept me from walking away. "Because I requested Mrs. Horner do just that," she said calmly. "Carry on, Nelson. I wish to be in bed as soon as possible."

Obediently, I continued to brush Lady Leith's hair. Watching the couple argue was the last thing I wanted, but I had no valid excuse to leave with Celia's hair unbrushed. Though I had wanted to encourage my friend to act as the lady of the house, I hadn't expected this kind of confrontation.

"Why would you make that kind of request?" Sir Horace asked, running his hand through his hair. "I assured Mother she would always have a home with me. To turn her out—"

"The dowager house is no more than a mile away. She'll still be on the estate, and she will still have a home," Lady Leith interrupted, her tone calm. "I think it would be best for us all if your mother moved there at the end of the party."

"Best? For all of us?"

"Your mother and I do not get on, Horace and I believe that will

not change. As long as she is in this house, the servants question who is in charge. I will not tolerate the disrespect any further. So, either she goes...or I do."

The threat was a surprise coming from the normally kind woman. From the way Sir Horace stared at her, he hadn't expected it either. "Celia, you can't mean that. I know Mother can be stubborn and unreasonable at times, but she is my mother. There's much she could teach you about—"

"She may have experience she could pass on to me, but she has been unwilling to do so. I have stopped asking." Lady Leith watched her husband using the mirror. She hesitated for a moment. "I will not have any child of mine growing up in an environment where I am not respected as I ought to be."

"Child?" Sir Horace repeated, looking puzzled. He blinked. "Celia...are you saying what I think you are saying?"

Lady Leith's gaze flicked to me and she gave a nod. I remembered to curtsy before I left the room. Maybe with this good news, Lady Leith and Sir Horace would be reconciled and their arguing would come to an end.

Which would be lovely if I could be sure Sir Horace was not the mysterious 'H'.

A sigh escaped me as I realized I would have to remain awake late or get up early in the morning to clean the dressing room. Neither option was particularly agreeable, but what could I do?

"Miss Nelson."

It was only through sheer force of will was I able to keep from jumping. "Mr. Harper," I responded, feeling my heart race. Had he been waiting for me to come out? Or had he been trying to eavesdrop?

"I am astonished how quickly you gained Lady Leith's loyalty," Mr. Harper said as he approached. His expression was unreadable in the dim light. "Few women come to the defence of a servant, as I'm sure you are aware."

"Isn't it the other way around, Mr. Harper?" I asked, facing him. I kept my voice down, in case there was anyone else nearby and to not interrupt the couple inside the dressing room. "Lady Leith has gained *my* loyalty."

The corner of his mouth twitched as though he were fighting a smile. "Mutual loyalty. How extraordinary." His eyes narrowed. "Do not believe I have forgotten the cipher. However Lady Leith found

it, I still find it odd she would share it with you. What would she expect you to do about it?"

"Decipher it, of course." That should have been obvious, shouldn't it?

"Decipher it? You?"

His incredulous tone grated on my nerves and I felt insulted that he thought it so extraordinary. "Why not? Every cipher has a key. One only has to find it. The book from which the cipher was taken was what I was using to find the key."

"And why would Lady Leith believe you were capable of finding this key? You may be clever, but not *that* clever."

Insult after insult! "Because I have done so before."

Swiftly, Mr. Harper stepped closer and caught my wrist. "You've what? You've seen a cipher like that before? Where?" he demanded, his voice low. "Tell me!"

His leap from one point to another was astonishing. "A few of Mr. Jonathan Sinclair's final letters and papers came into my possession to pass on to Miss Sinclair while I was in Bath," I said, keeping to the truth. "There was a cipher among them."

Mr. Harper muttered something under his breath that I guessed was impolite. "Where is it? Show me!"

"It is in Miss Sinclair's hands by now. I could hardly give away something that belonged to her brother, could I?"

His face darkened with anger, which I was delighted to see. Why was it so enjoyable to needle him? "Why would you send her that?" he asked, his grip tightening. "If you deciphered the message, surely you must have realized the danger it could pose to whoever holds it."

"So it is more than a mental exercise?" I asked with false innocence. "I suppose that explains a bit. If such things are dangerous as you say and Mr. Conrad Ingrams initials were on the cipher I found, was he caught up in the same thing as Mr. Sinclair?"

"That is none of your concern."

"Isn't it? Mr. Ingram was keen to get it from me. He went to great lengths to do so."

Mr. Harper stared at me. "Is that what he was holding over you?"

"Whatever he may or may not have been 'holding over' me is none of your concern. And, I do have things to see to," I said, pulling to get free. If anything, his grip tightened even more. "As

Lady Leith is in conversation with her husband at the moment, I would be loath to interrupt, however, do not think I won't do it if you do not let me go, Mr. Harper."

"You will not always have your duties or a mistress to hide behind," Mr. Harper said as he let go of me. "I don't know what you think you are doing, but you are treading a dangerous path, Miss Nelson. You do not know what you are so carelessly meddling with."

"You could tell me, since you seem to know so much about the mater." I paused, but he did not have anything to say to my suggestion. "No? Well, then. I see there is nothing more to be said. Good night, Mr. Harper."

As I walked away, I could not deny that he was right. Dealing with spies and traitors was a dangerous business. Until I knew the man who killed my family, though, and as long as I had a way to continue looking, I knew I would be unable to walk away.

"And a disapproving man isn't going to stop me," I said under my breath. Not even if he *had* been Jonathan's closest friend. He had no right to influence what I did.



THE VERY MORNING AFTER Lady Leith informed her husband of the news, the maids asked if it were true. Mrs. Horner knew better than to ask outright, but she was fairly beaming with pride every time we crossed paths. How they had heard, I had no idea. Besides Mr. Harper, there hadn't been anyone else in the hallway, so no one could have overheard the confession.

Perhaps someone had come along after I left? Or had Sir Horace's valet, Timmons, been the source of the news getting out? Had he made a hint, eager to be the first to share such important information?

In any event, it was known and the change was palpable in the house.

My path crossed Miss Hanson as she carried a tray up to her mistress' room. Her face was pale and I guessed she had either heard Lady Leith's good news or that the dowager house was being opened. Both bits of information would mean her time in Clarendon house was limited.

I had the satisfaction of knowing I'd at least helped Lady Leith solidify her place in the house. Of course, she would have been

unwilling to tolerate anything on her own, but I liked to think I helped her reach that point sooner rather than later. Her confidence would serve her well in the rest of her life, whatever happened.

“Life has never felt so wonderful,” Lady Leith said as I entered her room. She stretched her arms above her head with a satisfied hum.

“I take it your conversation with Sir Horace was satisfactory,” I said, setting her tray on her lap. Then, I moved to the windows and began to pull the drapes aside. The sun shone in, brightening the room instantly. It was going to be another beautiful day.

“Yes and no.” Lady Leith poured herself a cup of chocolate. “Our conversation kept us up later than usual last night. I think he finally listened to me and agreed he would tell his mother she would be moving to the dowager house. It is not a request.”

Her happiness about that show of support was obvious and it made me smile in response. “Will Sir Horace be telling the dowager about the baby as well?”

“I asked him to keep the news quiet for a few more weeks,” Celia said. A shadow crossed her face for a brief moment. “Although I have gone longer than previous times, I don’t wish for the dowager to know and then I lose this child as I have before. She would never let me live it down.”

Just as she hadn’t allowed her daughter-in-law to forget the other times she had failed to provide an heir. Between the dowager’s attitude and Miss Hanson’s behaviour, I was very much looking forward to the pair being out of the house. Celia would be well rid of the stress they caused.

Not that I would be in the house for much longer to enjoy the benefits of their absence. Firmly, I pushed the thought away. “Well, somehow the rest of the household has already heard the news,” I said to her. “It won’t be long before the dowager learns of it from Miss Hanson.”

Lady Leith scowled. “Why am I not surprised? Well, it will serve her right to hear it from someone other than Horace. Maybe it will make her realize that Horace is not required to report to her every detail of our lives.”

“Are you satisfied he is not the ‘H’ we are searching for?” I asked as I faced her.

“I-I don’t know. I hope he is not,” Celia said, pausing for a moment. “I tried to ask him why he had the cipher, but he said it

was nothing for me to worry about. It could mean he had it because he is meant to decipher it to find the person who originally sent it. Or it could be the complete opposite of that.”

In effect, we were right where we had always been with no idea of which way to go. “Well, we do have three other ‘H’s in the house to consider. Perhaps one of them will give themselves away.”

“All of them shall be in my company today. I shall do my utmost to learn what I can from them,” Lady Leith said with determination. “Sir Henry remembers your brother, but I cannot determine whether he was in Bath at the time of Mr. Sinclair’s death or if he heard the news from others.”

“Even if he was not there, it may have been possible for him to have gone to Bath, told no one of his visit, and then left without anyone being the wiser.”

“True,” Lady Leith said regretfully. “What a shame your brother did not have a valet who kept track of who visited him.”

I’d always wondered why my brother *hadn’t* hired a valet. It would not have been unusual for a young gentleman in his position to have a personal servant. Had Jonathan been unable to find someone he could trust not to give him away?

“I believe he may have found a valet more of a hindrance to his life than a help.”

Lady Leith tilted her head and then nodded. “Of course, but if he’d found the right valet, perhaps he would have been safer than being alone.” She sent a smile in my direction. “I myself have learned the value of a reliable servant.”

How easy it was to look back and wonder ‘What if?’ What if my parents had not rushed to London? What if Jonathan had been more careful? What if I hadn’t gone to the Burnham house looking for help in clearing my family’s name? What if Henry Bladen hadn’t stayed away?

“Even a maid who lied to get in your employ and was not who she claimed to be?” I asked, shaking myself from my despondent thoughts. It was no use to wonder over what could not be changed. “She seems to bring more trouble with her than she is worth.”

“Even then,” Lady Leith said with a laugh. “Now, I suppose I must get up and face my guests. What do you suggest I wear?”



IT WAS EASY THAT DAY to avoid any of the areas where a guest

would be. Lady Leith had organized a picnic, so for a large portion of the day, there were only servants in the house. I tried to get back into the study, but Mr. Stone had left the door securely locked.

He'd learned his lesson well. Still, I wondered if the door was locked because Sir Horace demanded it be so. Or was there another reason?

With no cipher to solve and no way to ask my own questions, I was left with nothing to do. A feeling of helplessness hung over me, and I didn't like it. Being a maid brought a certain amount of independence. Giving that up was going to be difficult.

A letter from London arrived, written by my great-aunt. It seemed Uncle Frederick would be arriving in under a fortnight. Aunt Beth thought it would be prudent for me to return beforehand so as not to arouse my uncle's suspicions.

As if anything would interest my uncle that was not an ancient manuscript.

Sighing, I drummed my fingers on the table in Mrs. Horner's room. So little time! What was I to do?

"The piano is behind you," Mr Harper's voice filled the small space. "You may get more enjoyment out of producing music than random thuds on wood."

"Is there a reason you are in this part of the house, Mr. Harper?" I asked, too tired and annoyed to be polite. I really wasn't even that surprised to find him standing in the doorway. "Guests are not usually found in the housekeeper's office."

"I thought we could continue our conversation, Miss Nelson." He stepped in and closed the door. "What are you doing?"

"At the moment, I am waiting for my tea." I folded my letter and slipped it in my pocket. "In fact, any minute now a maid is going to bring me a tray through that door. She will have questions and I hope you have an answer for why you are annoying Lady Leith's maid."

"Bad news?" Startled by the abrupt question, I frowned at him. He nodded towards me. "The letter you were reading as I came in. You did not look pleased with what it contained. Did it have bad news?"

Blast! Why did he have to be so observant? "A family member may have a need for me, and I will not like telling Lady Leith I have to leave her."

A frown creased his forehead. "You do not stay in one place very

long, do you, Miss Nelson. It's an odd life for a lady's maid. Wouldn't it be better for one to remain with one employer and build up several years of experience?"

"If you recall, my employment with the Burnhams' was ended due to something that was not my fault." More or less. If I hadn't been there, Bridges would not have had a reason to attack me. "And I chose to leave the Dunbar house due to an undesirable work environment. It is not as uncommon as you make it out to be."

"Why is it that you left the Sinclair household before that?"

"Juliet Sinclair was not left with the kind of inheritance where she could keep her own maid," I said, wondering why he was asking. "Again, that is something that was out of my control. Are you going to hold it against me?"

Mr. Harper stepped closer. "Who did you work for before you were employed by the Burnhams?"

"Why does that matter?" I narrowed my eyes at him. What was he trying to accomplish with his questions? "Am I suddenly a suspect in something, Mr Harper? Do you think that I , somehow, killed Jonathan Sinclair? Or that I am an agent for the French?"

In an instant, he was across the room. "What did you say? How do you know that?"

Right, I—as Julie Nelson—was not supposed to know that information. "I'm not an idiot, Mr. Harper." Boldly, I stared at him, refusing to get out of my seat. Let him tower over me as much as he wished. I would not be intimidated. "Mr. Ingram hinted he sold his information to the highest buyer. If that buyer was the French, what was that to him? He got the money he wanted."

The man blinked as if taken aback by my logic. "Besides, why else would you both be so concerned about secret ciphers?" I added. "There is more to it than simply being a message exchanged between friends."

"Secret ciphers?"

The door opened. "Oh, excuse me, miss," Fanny said, her eyes wide. She balanced the tray on one hand, the teacups clanking against the plate. "I didn't realize someone else was in here."

Since he seemed to be struggling to think of an answer—or was he simply annoyed at being interrupted?— I said, "Mr. Harper became turned around and was just on his way back to the other guests."

His lips pressed into a thin line, Mr. Harper gave a bow and

retreated. "He is a handsome one, isn't he, Miss Nelson," Fanny said with a cheeky grin. "I wouldn't mind giving him directions and pointing him where he should go."

Yes, *he is*, whispered my treacherous heart. "I hadn't noticed." Clearing my throat, I straightened up. "Does Mrs. Horner have a basket for young Mr. Leith? I wasn't sure how often she sends something."

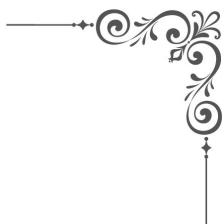
Fanny's eyes lit up and she tilted her head. "Is it true, then? You prefer Mr. Leith? Even though he can't hear a word?"

"I find Mr. Leith to be an intelligent young man, nothing more," I said reprovingly. "Despite what Miss Hanson has tried to accuse me of, I am not attempting to trap the poor man into marriage. I thought better of you, Fanny, than to believe everything you hear."

The girl blushed. "Yes, miss. Sorry, miss." She hurried out with her head low.

Why was it a conversation with a man was all it took for speculation to ensue? Of course, Mr. Harper being in the servants area, where he had no right or valid reason to be, would garner curiosity. Surely he knew that, so why had he done it?

"He is going to ruin my reputation," I muttered under my breath. Nevermind that Julie Nelson was an assumed identity and once I was finished with my quest, it wouldn't matter what anyone thought about me. "Stupid, annoying man."



Chapter Fifteen

In the little time left to me, there had to be some way to narrow down my list of suspects. If I could do that, perhaps I would know which of the “H’s” in the house I could trust with what little information I did have. Three of them—no, four—had been friends with him, after all.

All that mattered was that the matter would be resolved, not who did so.

Though I’d not had my tea, I couldn’t remain in the housekeeper’s room a moment longer. If the guests were out of the house and otherwise occupied, perhaps I could slip into the rooms of the gentlemen in question.

Determination surged through my veins now that I had decided on a task. Surely any action was better than doing nothing, wasn’t it? Up the servants staircase I went, my steps quick and sure.

As soon as I stepped into the main part of the house, I was struck once again by the peaceful silence that reigned. I heard no one, and there was no sound of talking. I made my way down the hallway.

I found myself glancing over my shoulder, half expecting to see Mr. Harper behind me. Pushing open the door of the first bedroom, I slipped inside. Green paper covered the walls, and the bed covering was also a shade of green.

The Green Room.

“Now, who was to have taken this room,” I said softly as I took it all in. For all the planning I’d assisted with, room assignment had

remained between Celia and Mrs. Horner.

The only thing for certain I knew was that one of the gentlemen who'd come with Sir Horace had been given the room for use while they stayed. Praying it was not Mr. Harper's room—or if it was that he was not about to return—I moved to the wardrobe.

Opening it up, I searched the clothes contained within. There was nothing suspicious in the jackets that hung there. I vaguely recognized the cut of the navy greatcoat as one Mr. Harper had worn in Bath.

"I'm not going to find anything in here," I said with a sigh. Mr. Harper did not seem the type to keep papers, incriminating or otherwise, where they would be easily found by just anyone. Sir Horace, at least, had hid his correspondence in a secret compartment in his desk. There was no such desk to be found in the bedroom.

Breathing out, I closed the wardrobe and made sure I left behind no trace I'd been there. I'd learned my lesson with Sir Horace's office. As soon as I stepped into the hallway, voices sent a flash of alarm through me. The guests had returned from their out of door activities.

Swiftly, I walked along the hallway and left the guest chambers behind me. I made my way to Lady Leith's dressing room to wait for her to return. At least, I had ruled out one bedchamber.



"YOU HAVE TO LEAVE?" Celia repeated, her eyes wide. "You cannot mean that! We haven't solved the mystery yet! We have learned nothing to help us know what my husband has been doing."

"I'm afraid I have no choice," I said with regret. "My uncle returns in a fortnight, and he will expect me to be in my great-aunt's house."

"Could you not have your great-aunt say you are visiting friends in the country?" Celia caught my hands. "How could you bear to leave without knowing the truth? After you have done so much?"

"It won't be easy, I confess. But as much as I wish I could remain, I don't think I can manage to keep all the lies straight. What if my uncle wishes to join me? How would we then explain my presence? I have not been your guest, and the rest of the household will be all too eager to spread the scandal that would result. The dowager would lord it over you for years."

She heaved a sigh. "You're right, of course. But we have not ruled out even one name."

"Well, I think we can be certain Sir Henry has nothing to do with this situation." At least, as far as I could ascertain.

Pulling a face, Lady Leith released my hands and went to her dressing table. "That is one person out of four. That's hardly any progress at all."

"But it is one less person," I said with a slight smile. "Granted, not one of the names highest on my list, and certainly not one I had considered before coming here, but it *is* one name we can remove from our list. I also did not find anything of interest in Mr. Harper's room. You and your guests returned before I could continue searching."

Celia hummed a note. "From what you have told me of your dealings with Mr. Harper, and what I've observed myself, he does not seem the type to leave anything important where it could be easily found."

"I thought as much myself. However, I'm not sure where he would hide a paper if he has been traveling. Would he have destroyed it?" The question had been running round my head since I'd left Mr. Harper's room. Should I have checked the fireplace for evidence of papers having been burnt? "What if it was terribly important?"

"On the one hand, I would suggest he would place it with his host, my husband, for safekeeping until such a time as such a paper would be needed," Celia said thoughtfully. "Given that you so cleverly discovered where Horace keeps his papers out of sight, I'm not convinced he would be eager to place anything else in hiding there."

"And so you can see how we are stuck," I said, moving around the room just to have something to do. "I can see no way past this impasse. My uncle returns to London soon. And while I might be able to concoct a believable story for why I am not there, I think I would prefer to leave it open so that I could leave should a new lead find its way to me."

"Yes, I suppose that does make sense," Lady Leith said, though her tone was doubtful. "Do you mean to compile a further list of your brother's friends who have a name, Christian or family, that begin with the letter H?"

"I don't know that it would do any good. Who knows how long

such a list would be?” There would be no certainty on my part that such a list would be complete.”

“You’re overtired, and that is making everything seem worse than it is.” Celia’s tone was compassionate. “Perhaps you should get some rest. I’ve often found a problem will resolve itself in my mind when I allow myself to not think about it for a time.”

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “And who will dress you for dinner?”

“I’m sure one of the maids will step in for the evening. They’ve done so before and the world did not end.”

“You don’t think anyone will find it odd that you’re giving your personal maid such leeway?”

Celia shook her head. “It is well within my right to look my best while I have guests in the house, and if I feel my maid is not up to the task, I can request the assistance I require.”

“I do have a reputation to keep up,” I said, frowning at her. “What would Miss Hanson think if she were to learn you requested a housemaid to help you while I was in the house? Not to mention how the dowager would find a way to use it to cause you mischief.”

But, she just shook her head. “Get some sleep, Juliet.”

Throwing up my hands, I gave up. She could be stubborn when she wanted to be. “Fine, since there is no reasoning with you.” I chose to ignore the triumph on her face as I left the room. Firmly, I closed the door behind myself and started down the hallway to the door to the servants staircase.

“Juliet? Is that you?”

Henry Bladen’s voice rang out behind me.

My heart skipped a beat. Blast! Why did it have to be him? Why hadn’t I checked the hallway before exiting the dressing room? Ducking my head, I kept walking. If I didn’t react, perhaps he would think he was mistaken.

“Juliet?” For a moment, I thought he was right behind me. “Juliet, wait!”

“Mr. Bladen, is something wrong?” Celia’s voice sent a thrill of relief through me. “Why are you chasing after my maid? I don’t know what kind of behaviour you are accustomed to getting away with, but I will not have you seducing someone of my employ.”

I reached the door and as I slipped past it, I heard Mr. Bladen objecting. “I assure you, Lady Leith, that was not my intention. I thought I saw someone I knew...”

“A mistake, I’m sure,” Celia said, her tone repressive. “Unless there is a reason you would be acquainted with one of my servants?”

Closing the door, I breathed out a sigh and leaned against the word. Too close. Would he accept that he had been mistaken and allow the matter to pass without further thought? Would he imagine the girl he once had courted had fallen on hard times and been forced into a life of service?

If Mr. Bladen thought I—Juliet Sinclair—was in the house, I had no doubt he would try to seek me out. He’d shown how persistent he could be, even ignoring my request to leave me be.

Again, I had to wonder what circumstance had thrown him in with Sir Horace and Mr. Harper. Why had he come to Sir Horace’s estate? Was he, as Celia suspected, the ‘H’ that my brother had tried to warn my father about?

My stomach twisted inside me as I went up to my small chamber. Though I’d found a cipher in Sir Horace’s possession, I’d seen nothing else to think he was involved with something nefarious. Maybe he had worked with Jonathan in seeking out French spies?

If so, did that mean he was working with one of the two men he’d come with? Making whoever was left, either Mr. Bladen or Mr. Harper, a suspect? Or were all three working together?

Was I overthinking the matter?

Sitting on my bed, I closed my eyes to sort through what I knew as fact: *Jonathan had been chasing French spies and been killed for his dedication to his country. A valet had been stealing secrets from Mr. Burnham and had been killed before he could name who he sold those secrets to. Mr. Conrad Ingram had been in the business of collecting secrets and blackmailing. He too had been killed. Sir Horace had a cipher, similar to one my brother had intercepted.*

With a groan, I fell back on my bed. Napoleon had been defeated earlier in the year. It made sense that the Englishman who had been selling secrets would want to make sure his actions were never found out, thus the dead bodies that had seemed to collect around me as I searched for the truth.

Mr. Harper had been everywhere I’d found trouble, but so had Mr. Bladen.

Sir Horace and Lady Leith hadn’t come to London for a season because of the dowager’s ‘ill health’. It was possible Sir Horace had

left his wife on one of his many “business trips, and been to London when Bridges was killed. His travels could point to him seeking out information or selling to someone.

On the other hand, Mr. Harper had been there the whole time. I’d seen him go in and out of the Burnham house on several occasions. But he’d also warned me about Bridges being killed by an unknown man. Why would he do so if *he* were that man? Doing so would only put me on my guard; wouldn’t he want it to be easier to get to me?

Lady’s Leith’s disbelief about Mr. Bladen shopping for his sister returned to my mind. What if he’d been in that shop to receive a note? I’d already guessed Bridges had used my poor former governess, Miss Graham, to carry his information out of the house. Had Mr. Bladen been there to take the message or to catch Bridges at the game?

“Either is possible,” I murmured aloud, opening my eyes to stare at the ceiling. “Is he the hero or the villain?”

Somehow, I had to get into his room and search for something—anything—to help me solve this mystery.



AFTER COMING SO CLOSE to Mr. Bladen, it seemed too much of a risk to attempt entering his room that evening. I passed another restless night, unable to quell the jumble of questions in my mind. Though I knew it unlikely I would encounter anyone at the early hour I rose, I was careful when I stepped from the servants staircase to go to Lady Leith’s dressing room.

No one was in sight in the hallway. I couldn’t quell the feeling of unease, though, as I hurried on my way.

“I see nothing was destroyed while I was at my leisure,” I commented when Celia sat down for me to arrange her hair.

“Did you think it would be?” she asked with a smile. “Really, Juliet. I may be a lax mistress, but I wouldn’t stand for the maids leaving the room in disrepair and expect you to handle it.”

Shaking my head, I brushed her hair. “What plans do you have for your guests today?”

“I believe the gentlemen had discussed doing a bit of hunting,” the woman said with a slight frown. “I’m not sure how we ladies shall spend the day. Why?”

I waited until I’d finished with her hair. “I’d hoped to have some

time to search a specific bedroom. I dared not last night.”

“I see.” Lady Leith tapped her cheek. “Well, in that case, I shall take the ladies out to watch the shooting for a short time. Then, you shall only have to worry about avoiding the maids at their work.”

“If I time it right, I shan’t have any trouble.”

While the guests were at breakfast, I knew the maids would make quick work of making beds and emptying the chamber pots. I would be able to put the dressing room to rights and have my own breakfast. By that time, the guest rooms should be empty of occupants and servants going about their tasks.

“Promise me you will be careful,” Lady Leith said, concern in her voice. “It occurred to me last night that this man we are seeking to identify is doing everything in his power not to be discovered or found out. He believes you are an unimportant maid and may feel it will go unnoticed if you were to meet with an accident.”

Though my own worries matched hers, I forced a smile. “Then, he would be sadly mistaken, would he not? You would make sure that justice was done.”

Lady Leith frowned at me. “I would prefer not to have that happen.”

Abandoning levity, I nodded. “I will be careful. My carelessness in Sir Horace’s office has taught me that much.”

“Then, I will leave you to your task.” Lady Leith rose and faced me. There was a healthy glow in her cheeks and I believed I had never seen her look so well. “I will endeavour to keep my guests well occupied.”

She left the room and I set about my work without really thinking about it. My mind was on how I would get myself into the guest room. Mr. Harper and Mr. Bladen had both arrived without a valet in tow, so I wouldn’t have to worry about a personal servant catching me in the act.

And if one of the servants found me? Even if the maids had completed their work, there was always the chance someone might come along. What excuse could I give for being where I shouldn’t be?

“Her ladyship is searching for a trinket, and could not remember where she put it,” I said aloud. It was flimsy, but perhaps it would be believed. After all, didn’t women who were with child have odd notions?

As helpful as she had been, I didn’t think Lady Leith would

appreciate me creating rumours about her.



AN HOUR AFTER THE PARTY left the house, I approached the guest room door. The maids had long completed their work. Unless Miss Hanson or Mr. Stone thought to spy on me, I would be completely alone.

The door opened easily and I glanced in each direction before stepping inside. It was a well-appointed room, and the sun shining through the windows showed it to advantage. Breathing out, I went straight to the little table by the bed. It would be the worst place to hide anything incriminating, so I didn't truly expect to find anything there. However, I had to search it to be certain.

As I'd expected, there was nothing of any interest. On the top, a pen lay on its side and a drop of ink was beneath the tip as though it had just been used. Mr. Bladen must have finished a letter before he went down to breakfast.

It wasn't unusual for a gentleman to continue his correspondence while he was away, whether on business or for pleasure. But to do so in his room? What message had demanded the man's attention so early?

I turned away from the desk. Where else in a room might a gentleman hide something of importance?

As I had done in the Green Room, I went to the wardrobe. My search there revealed nothing. With those two obvious places searched, I stood in the middle of the room, trying to think of other likely hiding places.

Under the bed would have been foolish, as the maid who cleaned would be sure to find anything there. As I turned in a circle, I noticed a scenic painting hung slightly askew.

Slowly, I walked to it, studying it. Mrs. Horner would not have permitted this if it had been crooked when she went through before the guests arrived. Therefore, I could only assume something had happened to knock it off centre after Mr. Bladen arrived. Surely the maid would have corrected it when she tidied the room.

Taking the frame in my hands, I shifted it so that it hung correctly. As I did so, a couple of folded papers fell to the ground.

Dread twisted my stomach. Hidden papers? I knelt down and picked them up. A few grains of sand fell to the floor as I unfolded the first paper. Three lines of numbers was all that was written, and

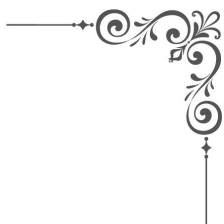
recently at that.

What did it say?

My fingers began to tremble as I shifted my attention to the second paper. This one had been folded and refolded several times. Before my eyes, the numbers were all too familiar. Even worse, though, were the letters over those numbers, spelling out the message. It began with one letter that made my heart sink: 'H':

'H, N dance with truth. Unless pay, past come to light and you hang. You know my price. Or remove N from equation. C.I.'

Lady Leith had been right. The 'H' I had been seeking was Henry Bladen, the man I'd once hoped to marry.



Chapter Sixteen

C.I could only mean Conrad Ingram. That evil man had sought information and sold it for his own benefit. What had he held over Henry Bladen? Had Henry then decided he'd had enough of the man's blackmail and then killed Ingram to be free?

If he'd killed once, he could easily have done so once more.

Remove N from equation. 'N', for Nelson. Me. Why hadn't Mr. Ingram, who had known my identity, revealed that to Henry? What game had he been playing at? Was this message why Mr. Bladen had found his way to the Leith estate?

A chill went down my spine. Henry had come to kill me. Should I trust Sir Horace or Mr. Harper to protect me? Until I knew for sure, nowhere in the house seemed safe. Somehow, I had to hide the letter until I could get it into the right hands. Where could I put it that a stranger to the grounds would think to look?

Through the windows, I caught a glimpse of the maze and the tall hedges that made up the walls. Perfect.

Without a bonnet or shawl, I rushed for the servants staircase and fled down the steps.

The one person I knew I could trust was out of my reach. Celia had taken her guests to watch the shooting to give me enough time for my search. Even if I knew I could trust them, Mr. Harper and Sir Horace were both shooting with the other gentlemen.

As I crossed the yard, the back of my neck prickled. Was I being watched? I didn't want to look over my shoulder and check. That would look as though I were hiding something and I didn't want to

draw unnecessary attention to what I was doing.

For all any of the other servants knew, I was taking my half day.

I had just stepped up to the entrance of the maze when a hand reached out and caught my arm. Startled and already on edge, I spun to the right and my instincts made me attempt to jerk away. A relieved breath left me as I recognized the young man who had caught me: Simon Leith.

Wait. Why was he accosting me in such a manner?

There was no time to even think as he pulled me towards him. I stumbled towards him, confused about what he was doing. At the same time, I heard a loud crack, almost like an explosion. Pain sliced along my right arm and a cry left my lips.

It took a second for me to comprehend what had happened. Someone had shot me!

Young Mr. Leith kept tugging on my left hand, dragging me into the maze with him. Off balance and in pain, I didn't try to fight him. All at once, he dodged out of the path and into one of the many alcoves that were all over the maze. The space was tiny, made even more close by the ivy growing thick around the entry. The young man held me close to him and even went so far as to put his hand over my mouth.

Up close, I could see the worry in his eyes. He had saved my life. If he hadn't acted, would the bullet—it wasn't a hard guess as to who had fired the gun—have been more deadly? When had Henry seen me? Had he laid a trap, one which I had stumbled into without considering the possibility?

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

"Miss Nelson."

Maybe it was a good thing Simon's hand was over my mouth because I knew I gasped.

Henry.

"I know you are here, and I know you took my letters. Come out and let us have this discussion face to face."

Even if young Mr. Leith was not holding me in place, I would not have gone to Mr. Bladen. Not after what I had learned. Did he honestly think that I would trust him? He must not have a high opinion of my intelligence.

"You and I have been dancing around each other long enough, don't you think? From London to Bath and now here at Clarendon. How clever you must think yourself to have followed such an old

trail. Who put you up to it? Harper? I would not have expected such a move from a gentleman such as he.”

His voice was moving, slowly yet surely though the maze. How well did he know it? Would it be wiser to remain in the alcove and hope he did not notice it? Or, should I navigate to the other exits of the maze?

It was difficult to think straight. My arm throbbed with pain, and I could feel the cloth of my jacket becoming soaked with blood. How badly had I been hit? How much time did I have to act before I was rendered completely helpless from blood loss?

“I assume I have you to thank for turning my dear Miss Sinclair’s heart from me. She would have accepted me if you hadn’t been on the scene. What did you tell her about me to accomplish that? The truth or some tale to spare her feelings?”

There was an unmistakable note of anger in his voice now. He blamed Julie Nelson for my rejection of his suit? He hadn’t realized my secret. How would he react if he did learn it, if he did catch me in this maze? Would he really let me go? Or would he still kill me for knowing too much?

Mr. Leith’s breath was hot against my ear, though he was as still as a statue. He may not have been able to hear, but he was alert anyway. At that moment, I knew what I had to do. I could not risk his life and whatever plan I made had to include the young man getting out of the maze unharmed.

Was Henry far enough away for us to make a break for the closest exit?

“Really, Miss Nelson, there is no point in playing this game.” Henry’s voice sounded closer than before. “I’m told this maze confounds all who enter, save those who know have spent hours studying it. I doubt you have had that kind of time with your duties to Lady Leith.”

It was true that I’d had little time to explore the maze, but I had someone on my side that Henry Bladen wasn’t expecting: Simon Leith. He’d grown up near the maze. He must know the path that would take him to safety.

How was I going to communicate with the deaf man, though?

Twisting around, I made eye contact with him. His expression was perplexed. No doubt he was curious about what was going on and had no way of comprehending any of it. What a gentleman he was to come to my aid in spite of it!

"I feel it only gentlemanly to warn you that my temper is not appeased by this game, Nelson," Henry said, his tone sharper than before. "I was prepared to have this out peacefully but you are only making this more difficult for yourself."

As if that would make me more willing to meet him face to face. The wound he'd already caused throbbed with pain and the stickiness of blood ran down my arm.

Young Mr. Leith cocked his head to the side. I brought my finger up to my lips. As much as I didn't want to offend him by the reminder, he may not be able to hear but he was still capable of making noise. He gave a nod, understanding my concern.

"Miss Nelson, this is really tiresome. Unless you are an expert at this maze, you must know you are merely delaying the inevitable. If you think you are going to hide the messages, you are mistaken. I will find them and you."

Really, Henry Bladen was doing a terrible job of convincing me to come out. He must have been truly confident that there was no chance I would escape the maze before he caught up to me.

Why had no one come to investigate the gunshot, though? True, the gentlemen of the party were hunting, so of course the sound would not be surprising. However, wouldn't someone have realized this one had been too close to the house to have come from the hunting party?

With a shake of my head, I focused on getting myself out of the danger I'd thrown myself into. Mr. Leith stared at me, his expression puzzled. I made a zigzag pattern in the air with my finger. His brow furrowed even deeper.

How to explain? With my other hand, I pointed to the bushes that made up the wall of the maze. Then, I again made a pattern in the air. I could think of no other way to mime the maze and prayed he would catch on.

After a moment, the young man gave a nod. His eyes flicked to my arm and he pointed to the left. I waited another moment, listening carefully, and then stepped out of hiding. Mr. Leith followed me and stepped around me. His fingers curled around my wrist and he began to lead the way.

"Nelson! You are only making this harder on yourself. You do not want to test my patience."

There was an edge to my former beau's voice that was more convincing than his words. He was growing angrier with every

passing moment. If he caught us...

"Nelson! Stop being a fool and come out!"

How could I have been so mistaken in him? If I'd ever been asked, I would have sworn he was as mild mannered as a sheep. Never had he spoken a sharp word in my presence...not until Bath, when I had told him to leave me alone, that is. How much of what I knew about him was a lie?

What would be his reaction if he knew it had been me all along?

As I followed Mr. Leith around one corner and then another, my mind continued to race. Somehow, I had to get the letter to Mr. Harper. Henry's comment about Harper putting me up to it convinced me the man could be trusted. Perhaps it was the blood loss, but the distance from the maze back to the house seemed too great for me to cross safely.

I glanced over my shoulder and did not see any sign of Henry Bladen immediately behind us. That gave me a moment to do what needed to be done. Digging in my heels, I came to a stop, in turn pulling Mr. Leith to a halt. He faced me, a frown creasing his forehead. He tugged on my hand as though to encourage me to keep going.

Shaking my head, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the letter. "Take this," I mouthed, fearful of speaking aloud in case Mr. Bladen was within earshot. "Give it to your brother."

Mr. Leith stared at me for a moment and then shook his head. He pulled on my hand again and used his free hand to gesture in what I assumed was the direction of the manor house.

"No," I mouthed, again afraid to speak out. I held the letter out to him. "Your brother must get this. Please. Your brother."

Why hadn't I thought to learn some of the hand signs I knew he made to communicate with others? There was no time for discussion. He had to go and I had to stay to give him time to get to his brother.

After several long seconds, he released my wrist and took the letter from my hand. He made a sign I didn't understand. Breathing out, I nodded and pointed in the direction he had indicated. Mr. Leith took a step backwards, his face twisting with indecision.

"Please," I mouthed, desperate to get him on his way. "Go. Go now."

Just when I thought I hadn't made him understand, he gave a nod and then made a left. I stepped to the intersection and made

sure he didn't come back. Whatever happened to me, Sir Horace and Mr. Harper would know the truth of their friend's death.

Trying to walk softly, I ventured back the way I'd come from the maze. Mr. Bladen was not speaking anymore, but I was certain he was still in the maze. Perhaps he was listening for me. My vision blurred for a moment and my head swam.

An arm came around my throat and a hand grabbed my right wrist. A cry left my lips. "There you are," Henry Bladen said, his breath hot against my ear. "Where is the letter?"

The longer I kept his attention on me, the more time Mr. Leith had to carry the evidence to his brother and Mr. Harper. I kept silent as I struggled to get free. Did he not recognize me yet?

"I will find it, you know, if I have to search every inch of this maze," Mr. Bladen continued angrily. "You did not have time to hide anywhere else. You have been a thorn in my side for far too long, Julie Nelson, and for what? Who set you on my trail?"

Every time I tried to jab my left elbow back, he evaded me. His arm tightened around my neck. "I am resigned to being curious, Miss Nelson. I have no doubt I shall forget this encounter soon enough. Remaining silent will not save your life."

That I could well believe, so perhaps speaking was my only way out of the situation. "Did you enjoy killing my family, Henry?" I asked with my last bit of breath. It was highly inappropriate for me to use his Christian name, of course, but the situation was not one where the rules of propriety applied.

Mr. Bladen went still. My use of his name or just my voice? "What did you say?" His arm loosened just enough that I was able to suck in a deep breath.

"You heard me, Henry Bladen!" I didn't even try to rein in my anger. It sent a surge of strength through me. I'd endured so much and searched for months to know the truth. Now I could finally know it all. "How did Jonathan work out that you were the traitor he was searching for? How did you discover that he had discovered your secret? Did you truly believe we had a future after you killed my family?"

"J-Juliet?" Mr. Bladen stammered. "No. You're in London. It can't be."

His grasp on me had loosened enough that I was able to twist around. For a moment, the world seemed to spin around me. "Indeed, it can!" I said. As hard as I could, I shoved him away. I

would have to trust my words to hold my once beau at bay. “Did you not see me yesterday when Lady Leith chided you?”

He stared at me with undisguised horror. “Juliet...you don’t...”

“Don’t what? Understand? I’m afraid I understand all too well! Did you imagine that I would sit by and allow my family name to be disparaged and blackened by rumour? Or was that part of your grand plan? Make me grateful you came after so long and no one else would look at me?”

“That’s not—”

“Do you mean to tell me that you had no part in the rumours?”

Mr. Bladen’s face was flushed, whether from embarrassment, anger, or exertion was difficult to say. His hands shot out and grabbed my shoulders. “Juliet, would you please stop talking for one minute? Let me think?”

The movement sent pain through my arm and again, everything spun around me, my gaze going dark for a brief moment. “Mr...Mr. Bladen,” I managed to say, trying to keep from swaying. “I did not give you permission to use my Christian name.”

“You’re...you’re bleeding. Juliet...” His eyes widened in shock.

The show of concern only made me angry. “Yes, that’s what happens when you shoot somebody, Mr. Bladen. There tends to be blood! And what did I just say about my name? Do you ever listen?”

“I-I didn’t know it was you! What are you doing here?” Mr. Bladen asked, seeming to recover himself. His eyes were still wide with horror. “I was...I was looking for...I mean, I have to find...”

“Have you really not put two and two together?” I asked with what was probably too much derision. As much as I wanted to break free of his grasp once again, I couldn’t muster the energy to do so. “Do you not remember the maid you saw in the hallway just yesterday? Lady Leith scolded you for being interested. It was me the whole time.”

“Y-you don’t know what you’re talking about. Juliet—”

He seemed determined to find some way to prove what was right in front of him was not the truth. “Don’t I? Who do you think discovered Bridges was the one pilfering information from Mr. Burnham? Or who else could know that Conrad Ingram sniffed out scandals and then sold the details to the highest bidder?”

“That was you?” Henry’s voice rose several octaves.

“Impossible!”

“And yet, here I am before you. Why do you not believe what is in front of your eyes?” Taunting him was not the smartest idea, but I could think of no other way to buy time. It felt freeing to lash out with every ounce of anger I had. “How could you? How could you take my entire family from me?”

Mr. Bladen’s head jerked back slightly. “Where is the letter, Juliet?” he asked, ignoring my own questions. “What have you done with it?”

“I don’t have it any more. Do you take me for a fool? As soon as I read those words, I knew how important they were. I have sent them to someone who will know what ought to be done with them.”

“You little fool!”

“Yes, I was a fool. A fool to believe you ever cared for me,” I said sharply. “Tell me, did you begin to court me because you suspected my brother had learned your secret or was it coincidence?”

He shook me, making everything go dark for a moment. “Who did you give the papers to? Sir Horace? Harper? Who?” he demanded, his tone insistent. “Tell me!”

“I would imagine by now they have both seen those papers and have put everything together. They are *not* fools.”

Abruptly, Henry released me and I stumbled back several steps, unable to catch my balance. “You have ruined everything!” he said, rage making his voice rise as he spun away. “Everything I have worked for, everything I have done, is for nothing because of you!”

“That’s what happens when you choose to turn your back on your country, Henry Bladen.” Well, it’s what happened when someone got caught being a traitor, but that was beside the point. “How conceited you must be to think you could get away with murder and lies! And for what? Money? Is that all you wanted?”

Henry was quick to face me. “To someone who has always had everything handed to her, what would you know about needing money?” he demanded.

Again, my vision darkened for a moment and I fought to keep my balance. “You killed my family because of money? You, who always boasted of your fine estate and stable income. You betrayed your country...me...for monetary gain. ”

“What else was I supposed to say? Your father expected a wealthy suitor for his precious daughter,” Henry snapped, stepping

closer. "A penniless dreamer would've had no place in the Sinclair family."

Everything he'd ever said...it had all been a lie.

"I can't believe you betrayed me like this, Juliet."

Astonished, I stared at him, fighting the desire to laugh in his face. "I betrayed you? Is that really what you are taking away from this whole thing?"

"You are not such an idiot that you don't know what they will do to me now that you have revealed me," he said sharply.

I'd been so intent on uncovering the villain, I honestly hadn't thought how the government would react. "They will interrogate you, try to persuade you to give up your confederates, and then they will hang you for your treason."

"You wish that for me?" His tone had become pleading.

"You turned your back on your country and on me long ago." It was becoming hard to think straight. My vision was fading in and out. "But I will grant you one last mercy, though you don't deserve it and you were not merciful to my family. Run."

He stared at me. "What did you say?"

"Run. If you don't want to get caught, try to make it to your fellow traitors. See if they stand by you. This is the only chance I am giving you. Please do not make me regret this." I felt breathless and unsteady. "Unless you intend to murder me right here, I suggest you stop wasting time."

With Sir Horace and Mr. Harper aware of what he had done, I didn't think he would get far at all. I didn't want to see him taken captive though. For all he had done, he'd had my heart once.

Henry took a step back. "I did love you," he said softly. He brought his pistol up and aimed it at me. "Everything I did was so that we could have a future together. I wanted to give you everything you deserved."

'Did'. Past tense. "And I loved you, Henry." I was determined not to flinch or make such a decision easy on him. "If you're going to kill me, do so already. Just know it will not save you."

His hand shook for a moment and then he lowered the pistol. "Goodbye, Juliet."

He turned and rushed into the maze. Breathing out, I reached for the wall of the maze, even though I knew the shrubbery wouldn't support me. I felt weaker than ever before, and somehow, I had to get out of the maze.

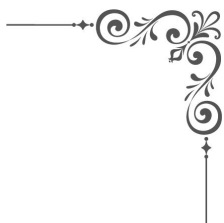
Gathering my strength, I took one step and then another and another after that. Everything around me seemed to spin and had become shadowy. Even the ground felt as though it was moving under my feet.

“Miss Nelson!”

Someone was calling for me, but I didn’t dare lift my eyes. My foot caught on something unseen and I fell forward. A pair of hands caught me before I hit the ground. Again, someone was talking to me.

“Miss Nelson? Julie!”

Was that Mr. Harper’s voice. The impudent man had used my Christian name and I had *not* given him permission to do so. That nonsensical thought was the last thing I knew as everything went black.



Chapter Seventeen

The gentle click of a door being closed reached through the darkness. Everything ached and I felt heavy, as though I'd been sleeping too long. But that click was a signal that it was time to wake up. I forced my eyes to open, and squinted in the bright light.

What had happened? Where was I? Was there someone with me, or had the click been the door closing behind someone who had left?

"Juliet?"

Above me, the white ceiling came into focus. I was in the small bedchamber in Clarendon that had been mine since I had arrived on the estate. Everything was bright because the sun was shining through the window. How long had I been sleeping? Why was I still in bed when the sun was up?

When I shifted my gaze to the right, I saw Lady Leith seated by my bed. She leaned forward, the creases in her forehead smoothing out as concern shifted to relief. "You're finally awake," she said with a smile. "You've been asleep for nearly eighteen hours. How do you feel?"

My mouth was dry and I tried to lick my lips. It did little good, but allowed me some time to consider how to answer. Honesty seemed the best way to go. "Terrible," I said, my voice a croak. I tried to lift my arm, but pain shot from my shoulder to the tips of my fingers. A hiss of pain escaped me.

"Don't try to move. I'm not surprised you do not feel well. You lost a lot of blood." Lady Leith picked up a glass of lemonade and

held it to my lips. "Drink this."

As I drank the sweet liquid, everything that had happened came rushing back. I remembered finding the incriminating letters. My panicked race to the maze to escape. Hiding with Simon Leith, wondering what I should do. Facing Henry Bladen.

Getting shot.

"You had us all worried," Celia said, getting my attention once again. "When Simon came rushing toward us with blood on his hand, at least half of the ladies went into hysterics. I'm not sure which part the dowager finds most distressing: that this happened at all or that she had to admit Simon was her son. Our guests will not soon forget this."

When had young Mr. Leith been in contact with my blood? When we were in the alcove in the maze? All the details of what had happened were fuzzy in my mind. Wait. Had he been hurt? "I'm sorry," I managed to say, trying to sit up.

"The doctor says you are not to move," Lady Leith said, putting her hand on my uninjured shoulder. "You need to rest and regain your strength. I've even forbidden my husband and Mr. Harper from questioning you."

"Did they..." I was almost afraid to finish the question, but I had to know. "Was Mr. Bladen caught?"

I wasn't sure which answer was the one I wanted. My friend shook her head, her expression becoming regretful. He'd managed to escape? I had offered him that mercy, so I had no right to be disappointed. "What happened?"

"I don't think this is something you want to hear right now," she said, looking away. "There will be time enough for explanations and questions when you are feeling more yourself. Just try to rest."

Why didn't she want to tell me? Dread stabbed my heart. "They caught him, didn't they," I said, watching her. She flinched and continued to stare at the wall. "Henry Bladen is dead, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid he is," Celia said softly. She finally looked at me and her expression was sad. "I'm sorry."

Closing my eyes, I breathed out. Henry was dead. I'd mourned him long ago, turned him away when he had pursued me again, but this was not the end I would have wished. Not even for the man who had killed my family.

"How?"

"Well, my husband hasn't told me the exact details," she said

with a sigh. "All I know is that they pursued him past the village. I think he was trying to find a horse. When they confronted him, Mr. Bladen shot at them. They were forced to defend themselves."

Henry wasn't one to go down without a fight, I knew that much. Had he known what would happen if he fired his pistol?

"I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you," I said, forcing my eyes back open.

Celia gave a slight laugh and shook her head. "You would say that," she said. Her hand covered mine. "I know you loved him and cannot imagine how you must be hurting to learn his true nature. When I suggested he was guilty before, I never imagined it would be true. I simply wanted to consider all possibilities."

"He brought this on himself and is the only one to carry the blame." At some point, I expected I would cry. I had loved him, once upon a time, but I was no longer the girl who's only wish had been to marry him. "He betrayed his country and me. I'm grateful I was spared learning this after I married him."

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't have to convince me," she said. "Would you like something to eat? Are you hungry?"

My stomach was twisting with nausea, and the mere thought of food only made it worse. "No, thank you. You should return to your guests before they wonder where you are."

"Most of my guests believe there was a minor hunting accident," Celia explained, settling back into the chair. "Horace has encouraged them to take their leave and most will depart tomorrow morning. The fewer who know about what really happened, the better."

"Does he imagine no one would find it suspicious that no one they knew was injured?" Had no one remarked on Lady Leith tending her sick maid? Or was no one aware of where she was?

The woman shook her head. "My husband has more connections and influence than I'd ever dreamed he could have. I don't believe a word of this would be spoken by anyone if he sent everyone on their way." She frowned. "On second thought, Miss Reynolds might be so bold, but I trust her father would discourage her from that."

Tired, I closed my eyes again. "It's over then. The man who destroyed my family is gone, and no one will be hurt again."

"At least not by him. Horace suspects there may have been other contacts and agents who were in contact with Mr. Bladen. The papers left behind may be able to lead to other arrests and

captures.”

Where had they found other papers? All I’d needed was seeing that one deciphered message, so I hadn’t continued my search. How much had I missed? In the end, did it matter what else they had found?

“It ought to keep Sir Horace and Mr. Harper busy,” I said. “They finally found the traitor they’ve been looking for. That is what they’ve been doing all this time, isn’t it? They were the ones who were working with my brother.”

“Yes. Horace said as much last night, though the extent of his service to England has been left vague. Finding your brother’s killer has been the one thing that has kept them at the work, even now that Napoleon has been contained.”

At least, with one less secret between them, Sir Horace and Lady Leith had the opportunity to resolve their differences. Once the dowager was out of the house, they would have an even better chance to trust each other. I only hoped they would be able to maintain their happiness.

“Mr Harper has been asking after you every hour,” Lady Leith said softly. “Do you know, I think he might be a bit smitten. He carried you here from the maze, and he shouted for a doctor as though he were in charge. Really it was quite romantic.”

Was he the one who caught me? I had a vague memory of someone saying ‘Julie.’ “Smitten? I hardly think so. I have been an annoyance to him from the start.” No doubt he believed I had been a hindrance to him.

“Rest,” Lady Leith said, her tone gentle. “You’re safe now. I’ll keep my husband and Mr. Harper away until you are ready. I’m sure answering questions is the last thing you want to do now.”

Asking questions was definitely something Mr. Harper was good at doing. How many would he have for me this time? I didn’t dwell on it as I let sleep overtake me once again.



WHEN I AWOKE AGAIN, it was another day, and Celia regretfully informed me that her husband would not be put off any longer. He insisted he needed to question me on what I had seen and how it had come about that I’d been shot. My friend and Fanny helped me into a clean nightgown and dressing gown.

It was scandalous garb for receiving gentlemen. Given a lady

never allowed men into her room, what was one more broken rule of etiquette?

I shouldn't have been surprised when Mr. Harper accompanied Sir Horace into the room. Celia refused to leave my side, despite her husband's hints. My small room seemed even more tiny with the three of them crowded around my bed where I was sitting.

"What made you suspect Henry Bladen was a traitor?" Sir Horace asked, getting straight to the point.

Taking a deep breath, I explained about the message referring to 'H', and the unsolved cipher among Jonathan's belongings. I told him how I had gone to Mr. Bladen's bedchamber on the hunch I would find something.

"You suspected me, didn't you," Sir Horace asked before I could continue. "That's why you joined my household. Because I was an 'H' who had known Jonathan Sinclair."

"I wanted out of Bath, and being Lady Leith's maid provided that," I said to correct him on that point. "The fact that you knew Jonathan Sinclair and also had a name beginning with 'H' was merely a benefit."

He shook his head and sent a glance at his wife. "Are you sure you want to hear this?" he asked, no doubt concerned his wife may be offended by what I divulged. "I will share what you need to know after."

"My dear, I have *already* heard this," Celia said with a calm smile. "Nelson confided all the details of her past to me nearly two weeks ago and I have been assisting her in trying to learn what we could on the matter. Mr. Sinclair was a friend of mine as well, you know. It was the least I could do."

Astonished, both Sir Horace and Mr. Harper stared at her. "You knew?" her husband exclaimed. "Celia! Why didn't you say anything?"

"It was not for me to tell."

"That explains the questions regarding whether we remembered Sinclair," Mr Harper said in a low voice, half to himself. He shook his head. "Surely you must have recognized the danger in such an action. If one of us were the man responsible—"

"But the man responsible for Mr. Sinclair's death was neither of you," Celia said with triumph. "And he did not react at all to my questions. I never would have guessed he was practically engaged to Mr. Sinclair's sister. He would have made an excellent actor on

the stage, I think.”

“In any event, you did find something, Nelson,” Sir Horace said, focusing on me once again. Perhaps it was the only way he could handle the knowledge that his wife had known more than him. “Something that sent you out of the house.”

He knew very well what I had found. Hadn’t I given it to his brother to be delivered to his hand? Was there a reason he wished to hear the story from my own lips? Would he need to make an official report?

“Yes,” I said. I paused to collect my thoughts. “It wasn’t even hidden in a clever place, but behind a picture in his bed chamber. As soon as I saw the numbers and the deciphered message, I knew he was the man I’d been searching for. Why else would he have it unless he was involved somehow?”

“How did you know? What if he were a government agent who had intercepted the message, deciphered it, and were searching for the traitor here?”

His questions made me angry but he did have a point. “Because of what Juliet Sinclair already knew,” I said carefully. “She had no idea Mr Bladen had gone to Bath at the time her brother was killed. If he lied and hid the truth one, it was entirely likely he would do so again.”

“Still, he could have lied because he was an agent of the government,” Mr. Harper said. “I do recall Sinclair had reservations about the prospect of his sister marrying the man. I put it off as a brother being overly concerned for his sister’s future.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if Mr. Bladen had been interested in me because he suspected who my brother was? He’d said he had loved me once, but after all the lies, I wasn’t sure I could believe that.

“The cipher I found was a message indicating that someone named ‘N’ needed to be removed,” I continued, pushing away the intrusive thought. “Since I am such a person, I was concerned he might have come to Clarendon to find me. I left the house to hide the message somewhere.”

Though I hadn’t gone into the full details of my tale, I was eager to be done with it. My head was aching almost as much as my arm. “When I reached the maze, I heard a gunshot and then realized I’d been shot. Mr. Simon Leith helped me into the maze and we hid for a short time. I knew Mr. Bladen wouldn’t think he had anything to

fear from Mr. Leith, so I sent him with the letter for help while I hid in the maze until I didn't hear Mr. Bladen searching for me anymore."

"Bladen didn't strike me as the kind of man to give up so easily," Mr. Harper said thoughtfully. "Why would he pursue you only to give up after a few minutes of search? Surely he knew that you would expose him."

"Perhaps he realized he had been outmanoeuvred," Celia suggested. "The man was a traitor and valued himself over his own country. Can we really pretend to know what he might have been thinking?"

The two men exchanged glances and nodded their agreement. "Is there anything else you would like to tell us, Miss Nelson? Did Bladen say anything in the maze? Anything at all?" Sir Horace asked.

Henry Bladen had said a great deal. "Nothing of importance. He did try to persuade me to give myself up," was all I said. My conversation in the maze had been highly personal. I refused to divulge it, though I knew it would no doubt be enlightening to the men. It would bring them too close to my secret.

After all, I still had to return home with my reputation intact.

"Thank you for your candour, Miss Nelson," Sir Horace said. "Harper and myself may need to ask you some questions again once we have had time to discuss matters."

Of course they would. Mr Harper hesitated in the doorway just long enough to say. "I'm sorry you were hurt in this mess, Miss Nelson. Though I did warn you to stay clear of it, did I not?"

How dare he? Celia practically pushed him out the door. "I'll have tea brought up, shall I?" she said, turning to me. "I think we both could use it. Unless you would rather have something stronger?"

"Tea will be fine," I said, closing my eyes. My anger leached away as I didn't have the energy to hold onto it. I would have to give Mr. Harper a piece of my mind the next time I saw him.

She was only gone for a few minutes and then she sat by my bedside once again. "The dowager is positively gleeful about taking over as hostess," she said. "But at least she is occupied."

"Surely your guests are suspicious about you spending so much time away from them." I peeked open one eye to look at her.

Her cheeks flushed with colour and she cleared her throat.

“Well, it is possible I have pleaded indisposition. My guests have assumed it because of my being...in an interesting condition.”

I let out a laugh. “Well done. Anything to avoid your guests.”

“It’s not as though I wanted this party in the first place,” she said defensively. She paused. “What did Mr. Bladen really say to you in the maze? He discovered who you were, didn’t he?”

How had she guessed that?

“Really, Juliet,” she continued, her tone serious. “It was written all over your face when my husband asked if Mr. Bladen had said anything in the maze. You hesitated.”

Had I? “I wonder Mr. Harper did not notice. He usually does.”

“I think he may have assumed you were in pain from your wound.”

Given that my arm was throbbing with pain, I could understand why someone might make that assumption. I forced myself to concentrate and said, “I did face Mr. Bladen. He was shocked and then horrified to see what he had done and who I was. And then, he was furious.”

“How did he know he should flee the estate?”

“First he berated me for being a fool and then threatened to kill me.” I hesitated before I admitted, “He said I had betrayed him. I told him I would extend him more mercy than he’d had for my family. The only chance I would give him was to run and hope he had enough time to get to whatever safety he thought he could find.”

Celia shook her head. “I know how hard that must have been for you, Juliet, but I think you did the right thing.”

Had I? Would it have been better for Mr. Bladen if I’d convinced him to turn himself in? If he’d agreed to give up those he worked for, would he have been shown some leniency? Why hadn’t I tried?

Deep down, though, I knew Henry wouldn’t have agreed to anything of the sort. His pride would not have let him. Perhaps it was better for him to die quickly rather than suffer the indignity of being a prisoner, being tried, and finally hung for his actions.

“Is there anything you need or want?”

At that point, there was only one thing I wanted. “I’d like to go home.”

Although my childhood home was forever lost to me, Aunt Beth’s house in London was my home now. I’d been away from Aunt Beth for several months, and her company would be just what

I needed.

Celia hesitated. "As soon as the doctor says you are strong enough—"

"No," I interrupted. "If I know doctors, he will be cautious and advise me to remain in this bed for at least a week."

"You cannot think the journey to London is a good idea. Not immediately."

"Please." I couldn't put into words just how much I wanted to be as far from Clarendon as I could get. "I want to see my aunt and put this all behind me."

With a sigh, Celia nodded. "If you insist. I'll summon the doctor for you this evening, and if he is satisfied you are healing, I will have a carriage made ready for you first thing tomorrow."

By the end of the week, I would be back in the safety of my aunt's home.

"Thank you, Celia."



THE DOCTOR FROWNED over me that evening and shook his head. He said I was healing as well as could be expected but must be careful not to overextend myself. Neither Lady Leith nor myself made mention of my intention to leave. Dr. Carter left a sleeping draft and laudanum in case the pain worsened.

Though my arm did pain me, I refused to take either. I wanted to be in full possession of my wits for my journey to London.

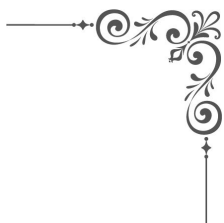
At daybreak, I was awake, having slept little during the night. My bag was packed with my belongings. Fanny, who had taken over my duties as lady's maid, came up to help me dress. Then, it was down the servants' staircase to the kitchen door.

The maids paused as I went past. Mrs. Horner admonished them for staring and sent them to carry on with their tasks. She took my bag from Fanny and walked with me outside. "Lady Leith wished for you to have this quarter's wages."

She pressed a leather bag into my left hand, and the weight was more than I was expecting. "What? No. This is far too much," I protested, trying to push it back. "I cannot accept this."

"You must. It is best not to argue when a lady is generous and you have more than earned it," Mrs. Horner said, curling my fingers around it. She turned to hand my bag to the groom. "Safe journey, Miss Nelson."

I took one last look at the house which had sheltered me and broken my heart. Although I knew it would be impossible, I wished I'd been able to say goodbye to young Mr. Leith and Lady Leith. Breathing out, I climbed into the carriage and left Clarendon behind me.



Chapter Eighteen

I have few memories of the journey to London. The carriage was well sprung with velvet on the seats, and the movement lulled me to sleep quickly. My sleep was not restful, however, as nightmares haunted and then awakened me.

Whenever the carriage stopped to change horses, the driver came to the door and asked if I wished to step out for a moment. Only once did I do so, to relieve myself. I had no appetite and the tepid tea offered turned my stomach the one time I did accept the offering.

When night fell, we were forced to stay overnight at a respectable inn. My fatigue and pain must have been written on my face because the innkeeper's wife guided me to my room and ensured I was warm. She also ordered my evening meal brought to my room, though I did little more than pick at it. My arm ached more and more with each passing hour, and the pain kept me awake that night.

The second day of my journey was worse. Whether from the sleepless night or I'd strained my injury from climbing in and out of the carriage, I was in more pain. My head felt as though it were on fire, and coherent thought seemed an impossibility. I could only trust the driver was an honest man.

By the time the carriage pulled to a stop in front of Faircroft House, it was dark and I felt sicker than I ever remember. The driver opened the door. "It don't look like anyone was expecting you, miss. You wait right here while I awaken the house."

Too tired to speak, I gave a nod. He must have seen, or else he assumed I had heard him, because he closed the door. There had to be someone awake inside the house. Perhaps only Carlson, the butler, ensuring the doors were secured for the night? He would let me in.

As I waited, I rested my head against the cushion. Did I fall asleep, even for a moment? The next thing I knew the door was open once again. "Miss Juliet!" Carlson's elderly voice exclaimed. I forced my eyes open. He had a lantern in his hand. "Good heavens! Come in at once. What has happened to you?"

"Please make sure the driver is fed and has a place for the night," I said as I climbed out of the carriage. "Is my aunt asleep?"

"I've sent Carter to inform Miss Rycroft of your arrival," Carlson said, without really answering my question. He waved for the footman to come get my luggage. "You do look done in, Miss Juliet. You must have had a bad time of it."

My toe caught and I stumbled. Carlson caught my arm, thankfully not my injured one, and kept me from falling. He was stronger than he appeared to be for being a man who must be in his seventies. "There, there, Miss Juliet," he said in a soothing tone. "Step carefully. We'll look after you now."

He guided me into the house. There was a candle on the side table. Carter came rushing down the stairs with a candle in her hand. "Miss Juliet! What's happened to you?" She put her arm around my waist and guided me towards the stairs. "Come along, you poor thing. You look done in."

If I looked as bad as I felt, it was no wonder they were concerned about me. "Have you been ill, Miss Juliet?" Carter asked as we walked. "My goodness, you're burning up!"

"In a manner of speaking," I managed to say. Everything seemed to be tilting and moving. "My uncle hasn't arrived yet, has he?" The last thing I needed was for him to be at home and woken by this commotion. What would he say? What story would I tell him?

To my relief, the maid shook her head. "You're safe," she said, her tone reassuring. "Now, will you be telling me what happened or shall Miss Rycroft have to worry about you until she can get the information out of you?"

"I found him, Carter. The man who killed my family," I found myself confessing heedless of who might have been within earshot. She alone of my aunt's servants knew about my quest and what I

had really been doing while away. "And he did not take kindly to my discovery."

"Never say you were attacked again!"

"He shot me." How many times had I been attacked in the last year? More than any other young ladies my age I would wager.

"Do you mean to say you have travelled all this way after being shot? You foolish, foolish child." she exclaimed in horror. "What were you thinking?"

"Shot? Is that what I just heard? Juliet Elizabeth Sinclair, what has happened? What is the meaning of this?" Aunt Beth asked. Her dressing gown fluttered around her as she rushed towards me. Her frail arms came around me. "You didn't mean gunshot, did you?" she asked as she embraced me.

Pain shot through my arm at the embrace. "I'm afraid I did," I said, breathing deeply to fight off the blackness that crept along the edge of my vision. The gentle scent of lavender my aunt favoured filled my nostrils. "Aunt, please..."

Aunt Beth released me. "Did I hurt you?"

For a moment, I couldn't speak. "I'm alright. The doctor who saw to me said it should heal."

"Yes, but I'm sure he didn't intend for you to travel in this state!" Aunt Beth's scolding tone shifted. "Was it worth it, Juliet? Did you bring the villain to justice?"

"He's dead. He won't hurt another person again." Tears filled my eyes. "Oh, Aunt Beth. I've been such a fool. I have been so stupid."

"Of course you are not a fool or stupid," Aunt Beth said, putting her hand on my left arm. "You're simply overtired and in pain. That makes it all seem worse than it is. Come. We will put you to bed and see how bad this wound is."

With my aunt on one side and Carter on the other, I was helped to my room. The air was cold and damp. No one had been in it since I had left. "This is intolerable. I will get one of the maids up here immediately," Carter said with a disapproving frown. She hurried out of the room to do just that.

Honestly, the air felt wonderful. I was warm and I shouldn't have been. "You have a fever," Aunt Beth said, resting her hand against my forehead. "Oh, I hope there is no infection. When were you hurt? Should we summon a physician?"

"And how would we explain what happened?" I asked as I pulled my gloves off. Why did it take so much energy to do such a

simple act? “No, just let me rest. I’m sure I will rally in the morning. I just need some sleep.”

“You little fool,” Aunt Beth said, though she’d just assured me I was *not* a fool. She shook her head. “I’ll have the cook prepare a poultice and some broth. When was the last time you ate something?”

“See. Even you believe I am a fool.” I’d made so many mistakes and been mistaken in so many things. Had I done anything right these past few months or had I stumbled on the truth despite my best efforts?

Suddenly, Carter was beside me and she started undoing the buttons of my dress. “Juliet, let’s have this conversation at another time,” Aunt Beth said, her tone gentle. “Right now, you need rest. We’re going to make sure you are yourself soon enough.”

“It was Henry Bladen,” I said, unable to keep the information to myself. “He was a traitor to the crown because he wanted money. He killed Jonathan when my brother discovered the truth, and then he killed my parents because Jonathan had told Father what he’d learned.”

Behind me, Carter gasped. “Mr. Bladen, miss? Are you sure?”

“You cannot mean that charming man who had been courting you five years ago?” Aunt Beth exclaimed in genuine disbelief. “The young man who came back and was so agreeable? Who paid you such attention?”

“That charming and agreeable man tried to kill me!” I felt obliged to point out.

“Well, he was perfectly charming when he was here, and I can only assume it was his charm that kept his true nature being revealed,” Aunt Beth said, waving her hand. “We can decide on a more fitting description for him later on when we can give it the kind of attention it needs.”

Carter cleared her throat and pulled my dress over my head. Was she worried I would reveal the part she had played in passing on Henry’s messages? I wouldn’t do that. It would be the end of her service in Rycroft House, since Aunt Beth did not take betrayal lightly.

I’d just hav to remember to tell her privately not to do it again. But that was unlikely anyway. Who would try to send me messages now?

Moving my arm sent pain stabbing down to the tips of my finger

and up my shoulder to my neck. "I told him to run if he didn't want to face what he'd done," I said, somehow unable to stop talking. "Sir Horace and Mr. Harper went after him and now Henry is dead."

"Hush, Juliet," Aunt Beth said gently. Her frail hand caught mine. "It's not important any more. Let's just get you in bed and you can get the rest you need. And don't you worry about Frederick. He won't bother you if he shows his knotty pated face here."

His what? I didn't even try to work out what kind of insult she had just delivered. I had no doubt she would be able to keep Uncle Frederick from bothering me, though. For the first time in many months, I was able to put my head down and fall asleep immediately.



I SPENT FOUR DAYS IN my bed. Every time I opened my eyes, headache and fever made me long for the oblivion of sleep once again, even though dreams disturbed my sleep. Again and again, I found myself in the maze, either running for my life with Henry right behind me or I was facing him and his gun again.

Aunt Beth or Carter were by my side each time I jerked out of sleep, a cool cloth in hand for my head and soft words to reassure me I was safe. Even as ill as I felt, I could see the worry in their eyes.

On the fifth day, I had the strength to sit up and finally relate my entire story to Aunt Beth. I admitted to what had really happened in Bath, since that was something I'd kept to myself so that she wouldn't worry over me. Once I had explained how I had come to return home, I was exhausted but relieved to have no more secrets.

"So, you see," I said, peering at my aunt. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking. "I was a fool. Five years ago, and even more so these past few months. The answer was in front of me all that time."

"You have endured far more than a young lady ought to have faced, but I still would not call you a fool," Aunt Beth said after several seconds of silence. "I met the young man, you know. I would never have thought he was capable of such heinous acts."

"There must have been something that Jonathan took as a

warning. I wish I knew what it was.”

“There’s no use wishing for a miracle. You are correct that your uncle need never hear any of this. I cannot imagine how he would react, though heaven knows you have done more to protect this family and the country than he ever has.”

“Has Uncle Frederick returned then?”

Aunt Beth nodded, her lips thinning into a straight line. “He arrived yesterday and has since shut himself up in the library. He claims he has a serious paper to write on his travels and explorations.”

Relieved, I heaved a sigh. Though it was a little lowering to realize just how indifferent he was to me, at least I would not have to worry about my uncle being curious about what had made me ill. “Well, perhaps he will be able to clear up a little of the mystery. He made Henry leave without a word. Why did he do that?”

“True. I will have to question him on that point.” Aunt Beth’s tone had taken on an almost eager note.

“Has he said any more about arranging a marriage for me?”

“I rather think my nephew has little attention to spare for such a mundane task.”

Then why had he been so concerned a few months ago? I shook my head, unsure if I really wanted to know. “Well. At this point, the son or nephew of one of his friends might be my only chance at marriage.”

“And why should that be? You deserve more than a dull, bookish man who is only concerned about the latest scientific findings!”

“You don’t know that one of his friends doesn’t have a Corinthian or *nonpareil* for a relative.”

Leaning forward, Aunt Beth pressed her hand against my forehead for a moment. “The fever has not returned. There is no reason for this kind of talk. You were careful to keep your name free from this matter, were you not? You can freely go about society once again.”

But there had been a reason that hadn’t happened before I had set out on my quest. Aunt Beth had few friends and did not go out herself. That hadn’t changed. There wasn’t anyone to sponsor me or invite me anywhere.

Maybe Lady Leith would be kind enough to send me an invitation for tea the next time she was in town.

“Leave it to me,” Aunt Beth said with a determined nod. “I will think of something.”

“It’s not important right now.” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. “Can you imagine what kind of story I will have to come up with to explain this scar to a husband?”

“It has always been my understanding that the best marriage is one that is founded on honest communication.” Aunt Beth’s tone was serious. “Whoever you marry will have to know about this adventure. Before you marry him.”

The thought twisted my stomach. Would any man understand? I wasn’t sure I could have that much trust in a man again. “Now. I am going to insist Frederick have tea with me,” Aunt Beth said, patting my hand. “Do you need anything?”

I opened my eyes and smiled at her. “No. Maybe a book to read? I haven’t had that pleasure these past few months.”

“I will have Carter bring you something.”

Perhaps the drama contained in the pages of a book would distract me. Though I knew it served no purpose than to agitate myself, I couldn’t keep from thinking about what could have been, how things might have turned out differently.

Had Jonathan given some hint of trouble that I had been oblivious to? Had my father? What if my mother had cautioned me not to fall in love with the first man to pay attention to me?

Or had Henry Bladen ever revealed his true nature and I missed it? If I had been more observant, would I have seen the truth? If I had taken more notice of where I kept seeing him, would I have been able to avoid the confrontation in the garden?

What if, what if, what if!

Aunt Beth might declare that it was long past time for me to return to a normal life. Was life ever going to be normal now? How could it with everything I had seen, learned, and endured?

“Miss Rycroft said you wanted something to read,” Carter said as she entered. “You’re feeling up to the task?”

Though I was tired from my conversation with Aunt Beth, I’d slept so much in the past few days that I didn’t want to do anymore. “I think I can manage,” I answered honestly. “At least for a short time. What, has my aunt read anything of interest while I was away?”

“There was a new novel by the author of *Sense and Sensibility* that she enjoyed very much.”

I remember when we had read that novel together the previous year and how much we both had enjoyed the fictional tale. "That will do very well. Something witty will be just the thing to take my mind off everything."

But Carter hesitated. "There is a letter, Miss Juliet," she said slowly.

"A letter?" There were a few friends I still corresponded with so the fact that a letter had arrived was no real surprise. Why hadn't Aunt Beth given it to me straight away or read it to me as soon as it had arrived? "I will read that then and save the novel for later."

Carter shook her head. "I suppose I should clarify. It is a letter for Miss Julie Nelson."

My heart began to beat wildly. Who would send a letter to Julie Nelson at this address? "I see," I managed to say, holding out my hand. "Well. I'll see who has written to me."

The woman stepped forward and put the missive into my hand. "Miss Rycroft is not aware that it has come," she said in a low voice. "With all that has happened, I thought she would tell me to burn it."

Surely not! It was not hers to destroy. What if it contained important information? But...she had warned me not to begin my quest and I had frightened her when I had arrived so ill. Maybe she thought she was protecting me.

"Thank you, Carter," I said, turning the letter over in my hand. There were only a handful of people I could think of who would write to Julie Nelson. The handwriting was familiar, though I couldn't put a name to it immediately.

"I appreciate you have not mentioned the part I played in Mr. Bladen's pursuit of you, Miss," Carter said quietly. "Given the man's true nature, Miss Rycroft would not easily forgive what she would see as a betrayal. Even if she was as eager as anyone to see you happily wed."

Not exactly an apology, but it was the best I could hope for from her. "The less we say on the matter, the better. You thought you were doing what was best."

Nevermind that it was presumptuous for *anyone* to imagine they might know what was best for me. I alone could be the judge of that, and I was not about to let anyone interfere in my life again.

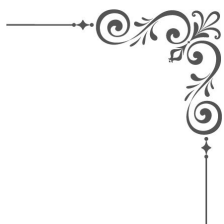
With a nod, Carter withdrew from the room and I was able to devote all my attention to the letter. Taking a deep breath, I broke

the seal and unfolded the paper.

“Miss Nelson,

I hope you have recovered from the unfortunate attack...”

The hand was not Lady Leith’s and she would have written to me directly. Narrowing my eyes, I studied the handwriting. Yes, I had seen it before, but only once. That, coupled with how few people knew about the attack, I knew that this letter had been written by Mr. Oswyn Harper.



Chapter Nineteen

After the insensitive remark the last time I had spoken to the man, I wasn't entirely sure I was ready to hear from Mr. Harper. What could he possibly have to tell me? My curiosity was too strong to set the letter aside, so I continued reading.

"It was a surprise to learn you had left Clarendon so soon and with no warning to anyone about your intentions. Sir Horace and I still had questions for you. I shall put them to you the next time we meet, though, so don't think you have avoided telling us all that happened in the maze."

Snorting, I shook my head. When did he imagine that we would meet? He believed I was a maid and thus I was beneath the notice of a gentleman. Unless said gentleman had unseemly designs on the maid.

But, no. I couldn't believe that of Mr. Harper. Not yet, anyway.

"I have not altered my opinion that your actions this year have been impetuous and ill-advised, but I cannot deny that you have been useful. Sir Horace and I had become certain that Bladen was the man we were after. We just had not found the proof. You did. I have no doubt we would have done so in time."

Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes. Damned with faint praise. Was his intention to write simply to gloat? To explain that though I had found the truth, he would have as well? I should just put the letter aside and ignore any further criticism he had about what I had done. I didn't need to read that I had done wrong or that I had been a fool.

Why had he taken the time and effort to write if that was the case? What would that gain him? There had to be more to it than a chance to scold me. It took more effort for me to continue reading once again.

Before he died, Henry Bladen offered us a few clues as to who were part of the conspiracy against Britain. There are more than one at work in London still. I believe we have now been able to narrow down who gave Bladen his orders. He may have been the one to kill my friend, but it was not his decision to do so.

My heart was in my throat at the words, and I had to read them a second time to believe what I was seeing. Not Henry's decision? How could Mr. Harper say such a thing! "It was very much his decision," I muttered. Even if someone had ordered Henry to do the deed, it was his choice to do so. He could have refused.

Couldn't he?

Once again, I shook my head, though it did little to dispel my confusion. After so much uncertainty about who had killed Jonathan, it had been a relief to know the truth and who was to blame. Now, Mr. Harper was telling me there was someone else?

"Who would Henry have listened to?" I wondered out loud. He'd introduced me to a few of his friends when he was courting me, but I couldn't claim to know any of them well. Were one of them involved in this tangled mess. "Oh, why is he telling me this?"

The only way for me to learn that was for me to continue reading the letter.

Due to the questions I asked five years ago, and the renewed interest I showed this year, I'm afraid it has become harder for me to follow this clue. Sir Horace has suggested that, once you recover, you might be in a position to be of some help to us. As a woman, you will be unnoticed and perhaps be able to overhear information we can use to bring all the traitors to justice.

Was he really suggesting that I be his spy?

After all his warnings that I was in over my head and that I didn't know what I was involved in, he was asking for my help? It was enough to make me laugh! Did he really make himself such a nuisance that he couldn't continue his search?

My smile faded almost as soon as it had formed. Wouldn't I have done the same five years ago if I had been in a position to do so? If I had known my brother had been murdered, there would have been nothing that could have stopped me from asking every

question to every person I could find who might have been able to tell me the truth.

Is that what Mr. Harper had done? I knew he had been a close friend to Jonathan, so it was possible he had made such great efforts to learn who had killed my brother.

Wait. Did that mean Mr. Harper's next suspect was in London?

"No," I breathed. I'd done enough, hadn't I? Why should I risk my reputation even more? Granted, Mr. Harper wouldn't know that would be such personal consequences for me, but he must believe there would be some kind of danger.

My thoughts were a tangled mess. How dare he do this to me?

I understand after what happened with Bladen you may feel reluctant to provide assistance. I would not ask if there were some other option open to us. Sir Horace has convinced me that this is our best chance to stop these traitors once and for all.

Could he really know that? What if they caught whoever had been in league with Henry only to learn that there were even more involved? What then? How far would he go?

Please contact me as soon as you can. Yr servant, O. Harper.

Breathing out, I folded the letter. I would have to ask Carter for paper and write a firm refusal. I had done enough, sacrificed enough. Now I wished to look to my own future and put the past behind me.

Though I closed my eyes, I couldn't fall asleep and I wasn't able to push the letter completely out of my mind. Was I making the right decision?



AN HOUR LATER, AND I had still not managed to put the matter out of my mind. Knowing how proud Mr. Harper was, it must have been desperation indeed that had compelled him to ask me for help. Surely, though, he would be able to find a way to manage without me.

Wouldn't he?

Aunt Beth entered then. All thoughts of Mr. Harper and his request fled as I took in the expression on the old woman's face. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Frederick is a three inch fool!"

Her voice trembled, and I couldn't discern whether it was from anger or some other emotion. "What is he saying now?"

“He says I should take you to the country!”

Somehow, I felt there had to be more to her anger than that. “Uncle Frederick does realize that such a trip will not be easy to arrange at this time of year, does he not? And it will be an expense.”

“He says the sale of Rycroft House will provide anything we might need!”

A chill went down my spine. So it wasn’t a mere visit to the countryside that my uncle was suggesting. Why would he want Aunt Beth to sell her home? He had no claim to it. Not until she died. “Why does he want you and I to leave London permanently?”

“What he wants is of no importance!”

“But he must have given you a reason to make such a drastic change.”

My aunt paused and shook her head. “His reason is foolish and stupid, and we will not give it any attention. If Frederick thinks he can just come whenever he wishes and give orders, he is very much mistaken. This will not be his house until I am dead, and I do not intend to reach that state just yet!”

“Aunt Beth, sit down,” I urged, concerned that she was exhausting herself. “Tell me what his reason is. Foolish though it may be, we will better know how to reason with him if we consider everything logically. Uncle Frederick cannot argue with logic.”

Though Aunt Beth sat down, her agitation did not abate. “Logic? I know what he will not be able to argue with and that is that I will turn him out onto the street for being an idiot!”

Why wasn’t she just telling me what he had said. “Aunt Beth,” I said as firmly as I could. “Just tell me. I promise I won’t be upset.”

She shook her head. “The last time you listened to rumours, you set off on a foolish quest and look what happened to you!”

Ah. I should have guessed. “Surely it cannot be as bad as my father and Jonathan being traitors,” I said, keeping my tone light. “Besides, who could have spread gossip to Uncle Frederick? He’s only been in London for a few days.”

But my attempt to put my aunt at ease fell flat. “He has heard the same thing from at least six men. They all asked the same thing of him: how had he not realized his sister had married a man who sold information to France?”

My heart sank even more. Oh, no. This was worse than the whispers and the implied accusation in the gossip section of the

Times. Then, it had merely been supposition, and no one has said it outright.

“That is slander!” I exclaimed. “There has been no proof of any such thing! Where did they hear it?”

Mr. Burnham had promised he would counter the rumours! Had his voice been insufficient against the tide of gossip? Why was this piece of gossip being repeated so many months after it first surfaced?

“Frederick didn’t think to question them on the matter.”

What? Why not? I knew my uncle had never been fond of my father. Their relationship had been polite but not friendly. “You can’t mean that my uncle believes such malicious lies!

“He does! He said it must be true since so many of his friends have all told him the same thing.”

Who was spreading these lies? Henry was dead, and he hadn’t been in London for some time before he died. Brides, the valet of Mr. Burnham, was also dead. Neither of them could be the source of this outrage.

Mr. Harper was right, then. There was someone in London, who’d worked with my former beau in some way, and that person was doubling down on the lies. To protect themselves, perhaps?

“Juliet? What are you thinking?”

Aunt Beth’s apprehensive voice pulled me out of my thoughts. She was staring at me, her anxiety even more apparent. “I’m thinking I want to know what Uncle Frederick said to his friends,” I lied. “Surely, he must have told them it was ridiculous, didn’t he?”

Slowly, my great-aunt shook her head. “From what I gathered, all he said was that many people can put on an act and he had never liked your father in the first place.”

Worse and worse! Now there were six more men in the world who believed the lies and would repeat the story with the added detail that the family did not even try to deny it. If it hadn’t already, the story would grow and become even more outrageous.

There would be no fighting it then. I’d thought finding the man who had killed my family would be enough; that the rumours would slowly die.

But it hadn’t. Everything I had done had been for nothing. My family’s name was being muddied worse than before I had set out to bet to the bottom of the matter. What was I supposed to do now?

“I won’t go,” Aunt Beth said, her tone stubborn. She paused and

then added, "Unless you want to leave the city, Juliet. Perhaps the country and a quiet life would be best after everything that has happened. Who knows? There may be a country gentleman in search of a wife."

The forced optimism broke my heart. That she was willing to give up her home if she thought it would benefit me was more than I could bear.

"No. No, Aunt Beth." Instinctively, I tried to reach out, but she was on my left side, and the movement jarred my wound. Sucking in a breath, I paused to let the pain subside. "You will not sell Faircroft for me or for any country gentleman."

Aunt Beth leaned forward and gently patted my leg. "Then, stay we will," she said. "You will stand firm against Frederick and whatever he might say. We are independent women and we are not to be ordered about, however well-meaning he might be."

She seemed to have regained her usual confidence. I forced a smile to reassure her. My own thoughts were more of a tangle than ever.



THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER a night of restless sleep, I thought myself able to leave my bed. After a long discussion in which my opinion was not considered, my aunt and Carter decided that there would be no harm in me making the attempt. With Carter's help, I dressed in a loose morning gown.

For the first time since the attack, I was able to take in my own appearance. I was pale, paler than I ever remembered being. There were shadows under my eyes. Even with my hair tastefully arranged in an elegant coiffe, I looked rather haggard.

"Well, even if I were invited somewhere, no one would give me a second look," I said with a slight laugh. "Not even if he was a country gentleman in search of a wife."

"Nonsense," Carter responded seriously. "A little time in the sun and you will be as right as rain."

"Thank you, Carter."

The maid moved to the door and then paused. "Don't go too far without me, Miss Juliet," she warned.

"I won't."

After all, the garden was not far at all.

I waited a few minutes after Carter left, just to be sure she

wasn't lurking outside. No one was in sight as I entered the hallway. Though I went to the main staircase first, the raised voices of Aunt Beth and my uncle sent me back to the servants staircase.

No one crossed my path as I made my way to the garden. To my astonishment, I was out of breath and weak. I refused to turn back, but instead went to the closest bench. It was a relief to sit down.

Breathing out, I ran my hand over the stone of my bench. When I had first arrived at my aunt's house, this had been my preferred location for solitude. The calm and quiet had been soothing to my grieving mind.

Such was not the case this time.

The flowers that gave off a subtle scent as I breathed in were a sober reminder of the time that had passed. Summer has more than half done, and soon the leaves would be changing. The surrounding beautiful flowers would turn brown and die.

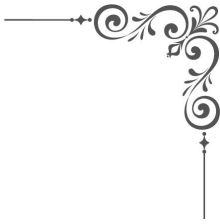
Why did my thoughts turn so grim? Usually, the garden brought me peace, but it seemed so elusive. I'd set out to clear my family's name, but I hadn't managed to do it. My brother's murderer may have been found. Henry Bladen would harm no one, betray no one else, ever again, but that hadn't brought the result I'd wanted.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. Could I be satisfied with what I had done? Should I just resign myself to having a name blackened from rumour and suspicion?

My right hand curled into a fist. No. Why should I lie down and take it when there was something I could do? A Sinclair would never admit defeat if there was some course of action they could take.

"Blast," I whispered. Opening my eyes, I looked over my shoulder at my aunt's house.

Aunt Beth was going to have a lot to say when I told her. Maybe I would wait until *after* I received a response from Mr. Harper.



Epilogue

Miss Nelson,

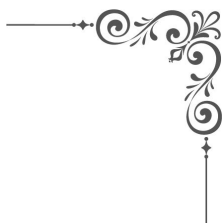
Thank you for your prompt response. I am pleased to hear that you are recovering from the unfortunate encounter with Bladen at Clarendon. A gunshot wound can be a tricky thing to recover from, especially when one is so foolish as to travel immediately after.

In answer to your question, yes. Though it would have been better to act now, a month's time should not cause too much of a problem. If you feel yourself ready sooner, of course, we shall be ready to put you into place. Merely send word.

In the meantime, if you have access to the papers, I advise you to learn all that you can of Miss Evelyn Russell. She has been a much loved dramatic actress in London for the past three years. Before that, she travelled with an acting troupe that took her to many cities along the coast. I'm sure you can see how such a life would have put her in the way of being able to hear much information and then pass it on.

Rest while you can, Miss Nelson. You may find the fall season more of a trial than you are expecting.

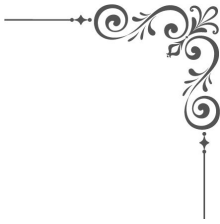
O. Harper



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This book would not be what it is today without the help of a few other people. A huge thank you to my editor, thepeditingservc for editing and polishing up my book better than I'd ever hoped for. Thank you to my sister for being my first reader, and my mom for being my first critic. And, of course, I can't forget about my lovely followers on Wattpad for being with me from the beginning.

You all rock!



Coming Soon

N

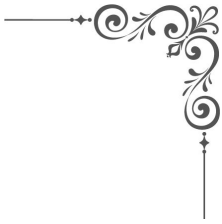
ot My Idea (A Gentleman of Misfortune, Book One)

“Lucas, you must return home.”

Twenty-two year old Lucas Bywood abandons his Grand Tour in response to those words from his father. Everything is not well at home and he finds himself in a bit of a fix. A little warning that his father had made tentative arrangements for his marriage would have been nice but Luke really wishes it had been anyone other than the young lady chosen. After all, Phoebe Ramsey had always been an annoyance and any time they had spent together had resulted in physical injuries for one of them.

Just when Luke thinks he’s escaped that particular future, he finds himself courting a young woman he doesn’t want, a furious best friend who wants a duel to satisfy honor, and the responsibility of finding who and why someone had caused an accident for his mother.

This was not his idea of what the summer was going to be like.



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Regency Romance:

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About the Author

For as long as she can remember, Bethany Swafford has loved reading books. That love of words extended to writing as she grew older and when it became more difficult to find a 'clean' book, she determined to write her own. Among her favorite authors are Jane Austen, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Georgette Heyer. When she doesn't have a pen to paper (or fingertips to a laptop keyboard), she can be found with a book in hand.

To get notified about new releases and any news, sign up to Bethany's Newsletter here: <https://bit.ly/2Hg7KJw>

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